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IN THE VALLEY OF HAVILAH=



BY

FREDERICK
THICKSTUN
CLARK=



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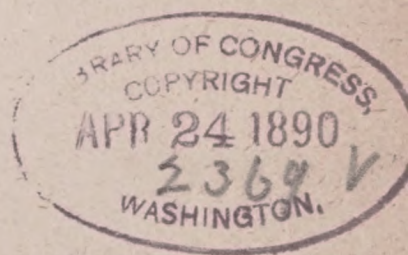
IN THE VALLEY OF HAVILAH

BY
FREDERICK THICKSTUN CLARK

Author of "A Mexican Girl," etc.

Strife is the father of all things.—HERACLITUS.

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IN THE VALLEY OF HAVILAH.

CHAPTER I.

THIS is the land of Havilah, compassed by the river Pison, "where there is gold."

Havilah is a name of so broad an application as to embrace a superficies of several of California's largest counties—so broad, indeed, as to render boundary lines vague even in the minds of those who know that country best and have travelled from one end of it to the other. The Havilah of the local maps is a small black dot, indicating a post-office, but men in other parts of the state who have mining stocks to sell never mention the black dot in connection with the interests and advantages of the region, except incidentally, as the point from which certain of the miners obtain supplies. The real Havilah is anywhere in the hills where gold is found, and a man may live in Havilah, yet be a hundred and fifty miles or more from the shabby little mining camp which bears that name. Havilah is generic and embraces a region, mountainous, campestrian, and fluvial, large enough and rich enough to have supported a powerful state in ancient times; the Camp of Havilah is specific, and refers directly to the tumble-down mining village where the post-master and the saloon-keeper ply their respective callings in the midst of an unliterary and thirsty population. To the inquirer

at a distance who professes to wish to visit the place, the locality is lumped indefinitely as the "Havilah District" or the "Havilah Country", and from the descriptions of men who have been there the stranger, if he has an imagination, furnishes his mind with a cosmorama of landscapes of truly Western amplitude, opening up infinitely varied vistas of broad plains and lofty mountains, of sunny slopes and gloomy cañons, of rushing rivers and mighty forests which shake the air with low-toned melody; a shifting picture which, though made up largely of a kaleidoscopic interchange of color, is unlike other pictures in that it makes itself audible—almost sentient—in its moaning pines and sobbing waters. If our stranger is new to California and the paradoxes of the mountains, he will fill out his picture with details, calling them the fabrications of ingenious minds, with which the season of the year apparently has nothing to do, and conjure up an antipodal state of things in which roses bloom in snow-drifts and wild strawberries are gathered the year round; and into these mixed conditions of tropical luxuriance and polar frost he will fuse a sense of sublime desolation, of the withdrawal of the world into a gray silence through whose inert soul inarticulate songs are striving for speech and utterance. It is all impossible, contradictory. Now our stranger will see in his mind's eye a landscape basking in the broad glare of noon-day, now shut in by the dusky luminousness of nights when stars throb big and warm in the near sky; now presenting a bustling young camp of a few days' growth, now a "petered out" town as desolate as the ruins of Babylon where the kings of Persia hunted wild beasts; now a stretch of adobe desert; now a blossoming tapestry of meadow-land undulating broadly down to a river; now showing surges of daisies and iris blossoms, through which cattle wade flank-deep; now gray as a

dead face in the desolation of winter ; and darkened fitfully in spring by processional clouds which trail their fringed robes along the mountain-tops and make earth and sky vibrate with the elemental music of thunder.

If the stranger becomes curious and visits the place, he finds his picture by no means an exaggeration of the truth. One must see that land to know how wonderful, how beautiful, it is. In the presence of reality, description becomes mere poetic nonsense, words degenerate into syntactical incoherencies. The dweller in the land of Havilah lives with a growing sense of his own littleness in this realm of epic possibilities, feeling that it should be peopled by genii and dragons ; he goes away enlarged by the consciousness that he has been the witness of unheard-of changes, the companion and intimate of stupendous physical forces, the friend of Nature's secret, introspective moments.

We are parts of the Infinite whole, pieces chipped off from the Infinite mind. Why should it be accounted a difficult thing to feel our relations to the Primal Love as near and pleasant, even though the need of human fellowship binds a share of our affections to the earth ? Here in the mountains there need be no doubt of at least the broadest meanings of nature and the soul above nature. The great harp of creation is strung with chords of continually increasing fineness, from the rocks and trees up to men and the angels. Woods, winds, and waters, in all their varied forms of beauty, are God's concrete thoughts ; man's spiritual excellences are His abstract thoughts. To understand nature is to draw near to the Great White Throne and worship in humble adoration ; but to understand the human soul is to take part in the workings of the Divine Intellect ; and feel the solemnity of its mightiest aspirations.

Whoever has watched the rushing storms rise on these

mountains and drive the sunshine before them like an affrighted thing ; or has lain in summer under the cotton-woods and listened to such sounds as the poet hears, stretched at ease under slow-swaying branches ; or has seen the great valley arched by a rainbow like the entrance into heaven ; or has heard the distant song of the mocking-bird, whose unknown words may mean anything that is good and joyful ; or has imagined himself into the low music of the river till he sobs and trembles with the exquisite sympathy of rhythm—surely such a one cannot doubt that he has added greatly to his soul's wealth. And I wonder if the mortal is living who could stand at night under the wide sky of Havilah and not feel strengthened and pacified by the visible peace of God's firmamental dwelling—not know that, somewhere beyond these glimpses and vague dreams, there is an existence eternal, tranquil, satisfying, of whose perpetuity our impatience of all littleness, of all inefficiency, is a sure sign and token. It was good of God to place us within sight of His peace, even if we can not at once attain to it ; it was good of Him to give us hopes of such attainment, even when our soul's tumult fiercely interposes. Surely, the mere sight of good things has power to make us better.

The valley in which the camp of Havilah is situated is broad enough for the passage of a dozen such rivers as the one that flows through it—so broad that at the farther side, even in clear weather, the mountains loom dimly through pale haze and melt imperceptibly into the wide sky ; but the river, as if resenting a course equidistant from heights it is forbidden to touch, makes a sudden angry dash against the foothills, and then all at once calms its rebellious waves and flows on quietly under the beetling cliffs, pacified by its one wrathful paroxysm.

The steep gulches of these foothills are always in shadow : from the river's bank the blackness in them looks like

cataracts of ink. In summer when the sunshine is yellowest and the shadows are blackest, the traveller glances up with scared, distrustful eyes, half-believing that such opaqueness is more than shadow—that it is something substantial whose weight may dislodge it from the air-hung ledges where it clings, and plunge it down into the valley like a landslide.

The valley is not only broad but long; and in winter it is very desolate. Winter in Havilah means the rainy season of December and January. The long heats of summer have dried up everything before the rain comes, and the valley looks like a bare, boundless plain with the mountains for white-edged clouds on the horizon. The rainy season makes it doubly desolate; then there is only the gray valley narrowed by the mists, a gray river in the midst of it, and, on clearer days, gray mountains on all sides, like a deeper, blurred shading of the sky. Outside of the camp there is no sign of effort anywhere—the road is not an effort but an accident; and there is no sound but the roar of the river, the throbbing of the winds in the pines, or the occasional howling of a coyote from the hill. On rare days the storm ceases for a little and the gray sky thins to a vacant dimness, almost as if the sun were about to shine through; but in reality that pale gray is heavy with rain. Even while you look the clouds fall from heaven with a plummet-like rush and the air heaves with the liquid melody of the storm. Gazing out through the blue-green air is like standing at the bottom of the sea and trying to look away through the endless waters. During the rainy season there is rain always in sight. Even when by chance the zenith is clear and blue, the scalloped rim of the horizon is dim with clouds that rise with compact edges which are soon torn into strips and shreds by sudden winds. Yet with all this moisture nothing grows; nothing suggests the approach of

spring ; and when settled weather comes at last, the desolation is so complete as to remind one of the earth before any rain fell and before there was a man to till the ground.

That is Havilah at its worst, in the brief winter. When the storms are over, the world rests in a stupor like the languor of convalescence, and Nature seems holding her breath in awe of the miracle of returning life within her. But, in spite of the grayness of the valley and the foothills, one feels the sweet, secret growths of spring going on in hint and suggestion ; in the rich quiet of things there are prophetic subtleties of song as unmistakable as in the silence of a young bird that has not yet uttered a note. Then the spring comes on with a rush. It is easy to imagine that you hear the grass grow, that you feel the tingling ecstasy of buds stretching up from beneath the moist ground. Almost in a day the valley is green with grass and bright with flowers ; the iris stands adrip with sunshine, the sweetbriar breaks into red stars, the wind shakes out honey from the clover blossoms. In everything there is an ecstasy of satisfaction with the "little span of life" even the glooms under the cottonwoods by the river, persistent as they are all day, are content to last only as long as the sun shines and then sink away into the shapeless void of night. Ah ! the beautiful world ! There can be no question of betterment anywhere : leaf-hid flower and thorn alike are perfect ; day and night alike are good. The souls of men become optimistic, religious ; people are willing to substitute the doctrine of transubstantiation for more practical, rational beliefs ; they say, let the far-off world wag as it will, our pleasure is here, where God is so near and friendly.

The country was named after that Havilah of Scripture which was rich in gold, bdellium and onyx-stone ; and there was a time, not long ago, even as men remember, when people flocked hither from the uttermost parts of

the earth in search of the hidden treasures of the rocks. An occasional fortune is made by the solitary miner even now, but that is rare. Havilah has gone down—"petered-out," the Californians say of it. If the prospector is able to supply himself with coffee, beans, and whiskey, he considers that he is doing very well in these days.

But the "boom" of Havilah's prosperous years left its mark on the region. Traces of the extinct population are common—not such traces as are found among the ruins of Oriental cities, no vases, no statuary, no temples. Nothing artistic: shreds of pottery, indeed, but of the vulgar-useful sort which excludes the possibility of a Greek influence; tumble-down cabins, charred sticks, the remains of solitary camp-fires in rocky recesses.

Sometimes these archaic fragments are more than suggestive, they are ghastly. It is likely that even the unscientific foot-passenger among the mountains will one day find out—and he will prefer to forget the discovery—that there are zoological resemblances between the jaw-bones of men and mules. The gulches are full of dead people—people who were once buried but have come to the surface again, and recommenced their restless journeyings to and fro on the face of the earth. The wolves and the storms have attended to it. They are famous democrats.

We know little or nothing of these dead men individually—the names of such exiles are as useless to modern civilization as would be a list of all the children of Israel in Egypt—but we may infer that collectively they were devoutly religious, according to their light; else why came they so far to offer up their lives here in the service of their god? With them there was no hesitation, no choice. The range of their ideas included riches and death, no more. Failing to get wealth, they died for it as for a great cause. We who use up our lives in pleasure as we do a cigar, hesitating even at the last to throw

away the useless stub lest there be a whiff or two left in it that we may enjoy, have no conception of their irresponsibility in the matter of life and death. It was sublime to see how they took possession of themselves, leaped momentarily into a conflagration of self-assertion, then passed, a red flame vanishing in smoke. Sublime, but terrible—a moral scourge whose effect still lingers. They knew no future, no past. They had the present, and filled that with the terror of their wills. The idea of immortality eluded them ; they said, We are not a set of tops that go on spinning forever. What they were, they knew not, cared not. It was enough to feel themselves masters of the hour, to ride dizzily on the highest crest of the wave. It was not a code of life—it was a philosophy of defeat. And there are men who have completed their threescore and ten, with a reputation for wisdom, who are forced to be content with neither more nor less.

Fools they were, traitors to the high ideals of their race. They gained nothing by their fanatic devotion to their god, reached no ultimate conclusions, had no reconciling assurance of better things, discovered no rule by which it seemed good to live and die. Their ferocious enjoyment of the present was a troublous experience at best—the uncertain poise of a desperate gamester for a moment on the summit of circumstance. They discovered nothing, I fancy, that could help you or me through the world. They thought little of principles ; they were busy with actions. Such knowledge of life as they gained must have been of the negative sort which impotent survivors substitute reluctantly for action, when action is no longer effective. Some of them perished like cattle, falling from stupidity to insensibility, without knowing or caring what the transition meant ; others cursed God and died, carrying the defiance of their lives into their deaths. Some stood erect for years against winds which would wreck

a ship in an hour ; the few whose prayers were granted learned perhaps that it is better to sigh for an ideal than sorrow over a reality (an *ex post facto* verity of little comfort), and discovered the grim truth that adopting conventional opinions of wealth and happiness is like adopting other people's children, entailing consequences of care with only doubtful intervals of satisfaction. No matter ; whatever they learned, they are wise in their silence, giving us to learn the lesson for ourselves in our own good time and way ; and if the knowledge we are capable of is after all only vanity, we may be glad at least that the acquirement of it breaks the monotony of our days with variety and purpose that even a consecration of mind and heart to false gods is nobler than brute sluggishness and indifference. And when at last we too shall pass silently into silence, we may be sure that our wisdom will be no less than the wisdom of all who have gone before us if we can trust that we go to the fulfilment of all that we left incomplete, to an infinite knowledge unshadowed by doubt, an eternal good unconditioned by evil ! What is there to fear in death, believing it to be the awakening where dreams of God come true ?

But we are not concerned with these dead men of Havilah. The dead are always an incident, a digression ; our chief interest is still with the living. Havilah has its gold-seekers to-day, scattered indeed and degenerate,—if we may put confidence in the heroes of local tradition,—but still moved by the devout spirit of their predecessors and willing to die in the service of the old god. They are not nice people, these modern provincial worshippers of Mammon. A brief sojourn among them tempts one to think them bad altogether. But one has need to take care of his conclusions. Practical sociology is an experimental science, and an experiment on such material may be easily misinterpreted. Certainly, they are not nice

people ; among them are gamblers, wife-beaters — husband-beaters, too—adulterers, murderers, outlaws of every degree of turpitude—men and women with wrinkles in their lives whose smoothing out must be the work of divine hands ; but then, too, there is much generous friendship of a boisterous, roaring kind, an unselfishness in material affairs which would be beautiful in finer natures, and a sense of justice amounting to a passion. That is not saying much for them ; to reconstruct a man from such data seems as hopeless as to rebuild a temple from shattered plinth, and crumbling cornice, but the result of such reconstruction is not altogether without its charm. Regarded philosophically as a legitimate object of human inquiry, these people are not unworthy of a place in the history of primitive races ; considered socially, they point a moral to civilized man, indicating as they do his infinite capacity for development and retrogression. We can not help judging and condemning, but it would be well to stop and think whether we are not judging and condemning ourselves under their hard conditions. Are we so certain of our own virtuous footing that we can without danger poise ourselves on our little ledge and push off those who are on the ledge below us ? Nay ; to whatever summit of personal perfection we may climb, the abyss of self is always yawning at our feet, ready to engulf us if we stumble and fall. Character is the aggregate of life's accepted good and evil, and only at the last moment of earthly consciousness, I think, can we compare our acts with our intents, and know how strong we are.

This book is a history of several of Havilah's latter-day adventures.

CHAPTER II.

THOSE who understand the signs say that the rainy season is over. By that they mean that the weather is in a transitional state; for at times the sun is still banked with clouds, his rays are faint in shaded gray circles, he is like a thought fading out in a word. Often even when the zenith is cloudless the rain still hangs on the high horizon in long, slender, isolated showers, like swaying scarfs of frayed gray silk, while mountains beyond mountains, each with a grayer veil of rain, bend forward through the mist. And people may look up thither from the valley and call to mind how God once gathered the waters together in one place.

But to-day the clouds are wiped from the sky like breath from a glass. The sunshine falls freely, refreshed by recent wind and storm. The mountains seem to draw their ice-crowned heads farther away from each other, and the snow on them kindles into a blaze that freezes and burns. Here and there on the southern slopes of the foothills the grass shows itself faintly. To-day the valley is a flat, desolate expanse of adobe; to-morrow it will be a sea of grass, broken by billows of flowers. That is the way spring comes in California. It is as if you were to fall asleep with the November rain surging and sobbing around the corners, and awaken in the morning to see full-blown roses nodding at you outside the window.

To Mr. Ephraim Pugsley, who was in a mood to dwell on disagreeable details, it appeared that the spring had never before manifested itself in a series of such peculiar annoyances. He had never before at this season of the year seen the sky when it looked so dry, or the earth when

it looked so ineffectually damp ; the river struck him as insufferably familiar in its garrulous monotone ; and he had never known the mountains to insist themselves so offensively on his attention—like blundering strangers who persist in being friendly. For Mr. Pugsley was not without a sensibility to uncongenial surroundings when he lacked the material means by which a cheerful masculine optimism may be sustained without an exhausting effort of the will. Toiling along the valley in his decrepit emigrant wagon, it was hardly to be expected that he should feel cheerful. But there was more than the weather and the wagon to complain of. He had a sickly wife and two healthy, grown-up daughters on his hands ; and, worse than all the rest, not a drop of comfort had passed his lips since six o'clock this morning, and it was now almost nine.

The good man was feeling the coercion of circumstances in a lively manner. He was disgusted with life. However, that was nothing new. Indeed, it was noticeable that Mr. Pugsley was always either disgusted with life or madly in love with it, according to the condition of his bottle. Just now the very sky was hateful, the landscape was insulting in its arrogant immobility. The mountains especially stirred him to unreasoning rebellion. He longed to kick them out of sight beyond the horizon ; he hated them more than he could have done had they pointed derisive fingers and hooted their scorn of him ; he hated everything more than he had ever done in all his life before. The two skinny, straining horses were repulsive as a picture of conscientious, futile endeavor. Mr. Pugsley was not in a mood to contemplate pictures of conscientious endeavor that worked with small result to lessen the distance between that point and the next tavern. He cursed the poor beasts mentally while he lashed them with his great rawhide, thinking all the

time that he could manage to put up with that snail's pace if they would only resent his ill-usage with as much as a turn of their drooping ears or a twist of their mangy tails. It angered him to know that he was expending his energies on flesh quite callous to the sting of his whip : he might as well cowhide a stone wall for all the relief it afforded his feelings. He wanted to make something cry out and implore.

He had entered the valley early in the morning : it would be impossible to reach the camp of Havilah before noon—three long hours yet. That made in all six hours of unmodified thirst between drinks. Good heavens ! what was the world coming to ? Why, in the improvident moment of comfort succeeding his morning's glass had he decided to keep his remaining six bits to provide a slice of bacon for the family on reaching Havilah instead of filling his bottle like a Christian and faring sumptuously all the way ? At this point his reflections on his own strength of mind were by no means flattering. Decidedly, he had acted the part of a fool. When a man begins to call himself a fool, and to believe what he says, his distress is indeed great. A deficiency of nervous fibre in the animal organism does not necessarily indicate a dullness of all sensation and emotion ; it is easy to believe that a cubic inch of chalk is the cemetery of unnumbered lively joys and sorrows, granting that the animalcules of ancient ocean beds were capable of caring for their dinner. Probably Mr. Pugsley's pangs were no less severe because he belonged to an undeveloped variety of the human species ; on the contrary, the fact may be adduced as an argument in favor of the keener poignancy of his griefs, for is not development itself a series of pangs accompanying a protracted yearning for the unattainable ? And are not the pangs of growth at least as vivid as those of subsequent fulfilment ?

Mr. Pugsley turned on his seat and scowled back at the occupants of the wagon as if to fill up a gap in his anger by contemplating its adjuncts.

There was Mrs. Pugsley, a hatchet-faced, moist-looking woman of past forty, who may be described as looking less like herself than the fading consciousness of herself. Vapid, featureless, disintegrated, she seemed to be passing through a slow process of evaporation in which the atmosphere assisted. She was reclining on a bundle of dirty blankets and damp straw, with an unwashed skillet threatening her ear, and one coarse shoe, unlaced and flapping wide in betrayal of an undarned stocking, reposing half way inside a lidless coffee-pot. Her eyes were closed, and occasionally she put her hand to her head in impatient pain. Behind her was Maud Eliza, the youngest of the family, a strapping miss of eighteen, who was staring stupidly at the muddy wagon-track and plaiting and unplaiting her soiled apron in intervals of yawning. Maud Eliza was a sort of incipient fool. She was never quite herself unless she was giggling, and at her best she had never been known to do more than make a desultory remark of less than average intelligence. Maria, the elder of the sisters, and the strong-minded one of the family, was fast asleep in the back of the wagon, bolt upright and open-mouthed, quite undisturbed by the heaving and plunging of the unwieldy vehicle.

Mr. Pugsley was in a humor to expatiate on the hardships of a man doomed to take care of a family of women. Just now his daughters seemed hardly less disagreeable in their over-measure of health than did their mother in her never-ending fretfulness and complaining. What had they been born for, the whole three of them? What was of the use such incapacity—of such sickliness and ineffectual health? Those bouncing girls, with their broad shoulders and red cheeks—why had such health been given to them if

not to be turned somehow to the advantage of the family? And yet those girls had never even earned their salt. Now, think of that, said Mr. Pugsley to himself—never even earned their salt. Were they not as able to work for their living as *he* was? And, if so, why hadn't they done it? He asked the question with a flourish of mental oratory that surprised himself. Why hadn't they done it? He gave a slash at the melancholy steeds, and then glared back at his female dependents. Why, indeed? They could do it, and, by hokey, they should do it if ever them gumgummed old plugs—Mr. Pugsley used a stronger adjective—dragged him and his gumgummed family into camp at Havilah. They'd find out a thing or two then, or he was much mistaken. They'd see then who was the head of the family and who was to be obeyed. He felt greatly injured, greatly in earnest. His thirstiness filled him with an overpowering sense of wrong, and he resolved that the future should be revolutionary and reformatory. Those girls should go to work. He had had enough of this.

There was Maria snoring contentedly in her corner—he wished with all his heart that she would bite her tongue as the wagon made one of its sudden, crazy lunges. It would have done him good just to hear her scream; though, come to think of it, he had never heard Maria scream—she wasn't one of that kind. It was more like her to make other folks scream than do it herself. She had a temper Maria had. He had always hesitated about crossing her will—he admitted that he was a trifle afraid of her, even in his present mood of wrathful recrimination. There was such an unpleasant look in her eye when her temper was fired, and she was uncommonly strong in her arms, too, as he had good reason to remember. He was obliged to confess that there was but little community of feeling between his eldest daughter and himself. She had fallen

into a state of chronic objection, she disapproved of all his habits ; it had been largely through her interference that he had kept that six bits in his pocket this very morning, instead of having his bottle filled like a man of sense ; and here was the consequence of it. Well ! he would pay her for that when they got to Havilah. Maria should go to work. He nodded his head emphatically as he dramatized himself in the act of making her do what she disliked. To be sure, she had always had her own way—she knew what she didn't want and acted accordingly—but did that signify that she was always going to keep it up ? Mr. Pugsley thought not. This thing had gone far enough, Maria should go to work—if he could make her.

As for Maud Eliza, the giggler, he had no doubt of his ability to manage her. And he would put an end to her everlasting tittering, which was always forthcoming as a sort of standing exclamation point to Maria's sarcasms against him who, by virtue of his position as husband and father, ought to be revered and cherished by his dependents, not trodden underfoot and insulted. Mr. Pugsley straightened himself after arriving at this conclusion. The thought of his ability to make others uncomfortable brought a glimpse of comfort into his miserable present—revived him like a river that waters a thirsty land.

He cast a look of inclusive vindictiveness at the unconscious group behind him, but his eye rested longest and most malevolently upon his wife. There was the prime cause of all his woes—that woman ; had he never set eyes on her, what might he not be by this time ? State senator, perhaps, or—delicious possibility !—proprietor of a gin-shop on Dupont Street, in San Francisco. He ground his teeth together with rage at the thought. That woman—she had been a chain to his neck, an obstacle to his feet since the first day he met her. And it was she who objected this very morning, seconding Maria in that whin-

ing voice of hers, when he paid two bits at the last tavern for his finger of the oh-be-joyful—had begged him to buy her a ham sandwich instead, advancing as an argument that otherwise she should immediately take measures to die. Ham sandwich, indeed! Was it a time to talk of ham sandwiches when his last dollar was busted in a land where budge was two bits a glass?

And here she was, with her two infernal healthy brats lolling about like a trio of ladies out for an airing, while he—they might as well openly mock at his distress as be thus indifferent to it.

He could bear it no longer. His rage strangled him. His outraged feelings, confined too long to one channel broke forth in violence. He reached over and gave his wife a deliberate, vicious poke in the ribs with the butt of his whip. (Such modes of expressing masculine ideas with their original subjective intensity are not yet obsolete in California).

Mrs. Pusgsley started convulsively, gave a stifled groan and opened her eyes. Then, raising herself on one elbow, she stared at him, wide-eyed and helpless, catching her breath. She made no attempt at retaliation. She seemed to dread a repetition of the brutal thrust.

“Oh, Ephraim!” she gasped, finally, falling back and clutching her side.

“‘Oh, Ephraim!’” mimicked her spouse, glaring at her with bleared, furious eyes. “Did ye say ‘oh, Ephraim’ to me’n’ in that air tone o’ voice? Did ye? I’ll ‘oh, Ephraim’ ye!” And he gave the helpless creature another deliberate poke, boring the whipstock into her side with ferocious enjoyment.

The woman sprang up, aghast and screaming.

“Oh, Lord A’mighty, ye’ve killed me!” she cried, in a shrill half-shriek, “ye’ve run the whipstock clean through me!”

“I’ll larn ye!” growled Ephraim, just as he saw Maria opening her eyes from her nap. “I’ll larn ye!”

“What’s he been doin’ to ye?” cried the girl, only half awake. “’She been layin’ hands on ye? Shall I thump ’im?”

Mrs. Pugsley had settled back again among the blankets and was clutching her side hysterically. For some time she could not speak, but raised herself repeatedly with painful exhalations. She recovered, however, sooner than was to be expected. Probably it was not the first attack of the kind from which she had recovered.

“He’ll be the death o’ me yet,” she began presently, in a high wailing voice. “I’ve knowed it—I’ve felt it in my bones for years, ’n’ now here ’tis. ’N’ I wa’n’t doin’ nothin nuther,—ye know I wa’n’t, Ephraim,—not the fust blessed thing. Why couldn’t ye lenfme be? I didn’t say nothin’ ’n’ I wa’n’t a-tetchin’ o’ ye, but was behavin’ decent ’n’ ’spectable, jes’ ’s I was learned to, allus. Oh, Lord, my side, my side! Ye’ve smashed it clean in—I know by the feelin’ o’ it t ye’ve smashed it clean in!”

“I’ll larn ye!” repeated Ephraim, alarmed at the look on Maria’s face, which he perceived, as the saying goes, with the tail of his eye.

“I don’t see what I’ve done to be used so fer,” continued Mrs. Pugsley, closing her eyes and clutching her side, while the tears oozed forth copiously. “I don’t see why I can’t be let ’lone when I’m behavin’ decent ’n’ ’spectable. What’s the use o’ knowin’ how to behave if a body can’t be let ’lone when they’re doin’ it? I didn’t do nothin’ to be poked fer—I don’t never do nothin’, n’ the hull kit ’n’ possey o’ ye know it’s well ’s what I do. I was behavin’ myself like a lady, peaceable n’ quiet. When I was a Swipes ’fore I was married I wa’n’t battered about like this ’ere. I don’t harm nobody, ’n’ the world’s wide ’n’ they’s room ’nough in it ’thout quar’lin. Oh,

Lord, my side ! Ye've done fer me this time—ye've bored a hole clean through the ribs o' me—ye've mixed my lungs 'n' liver all together ! ”

“ The devil was allus in ye,” declared Ephraim in weak self-justification.

“ I knowed suthin' was goin to happen, though—I had a dream las' night 'n' I knowed well 'nough, twas a warn-in'," continued the moist woman, assuming the adjuring tone of an interpreter of dreams and omens. “ I dreamt I was dressed up beautiful in a ruffled gown 'n' hoops 'n' was a stan'in' on a platform singin' *Sweet Belle Mahone* like a bird in a tree when the audience commenced yellin' fer me to stop, 'n' when I didn't they fired beer-mugs into me till my face was all cut 'n' bleedin' 'n' I woke up a-scream-in'. 'N' now here's what it meant ! ”

“ What's he been doin' to ye ? ” demanded Maria again, now fully awake. Her voice held a menace for her father, even while it was roughly sympathetic for her mother's pain.

“ Oh, nothin', nothin' ! ” repeated the moist woman, drearily. “ It don't matter, nohow. It's only me. I ain't nobody. Oh, why was I ever borned into this 'ere world ? ”

“ That's what *I'd* like to know,” put in Ephraim, sharply.

“ Everybody's forgot 't I was a Swipes wunst 'n' lived in style,” complained Mrs. Pugsley, her present wretchedness reawakening vibrations of memory. “ I'm a pure, no 'count critter. Nobody ain't proud o' me.”

“ I want to know what he's been doin' to ye,” insisted Maria, impatiently.

“ Oh, he didn't do nothin'—leastways nothin' fer ye to mind 'bout,” replied Mrs. Pugley in the monotonous sing-song of superficial resignation. “ I don't want ye to quar'l with 'im o' my 'count. I ain't nobody to fight over,

if I *was* wunst a Swipes o' Swipes's Bar. Oh, dear ! oh my side ! Never mind what he's been a-doin' to me. I don't want ye quar'lin'—the world's wide 'nough to keep shet o' that. Oh, Lord !” Here an overpowering sense of injury overcame Mrs. Pugsley's faint desire to keep her husband and daughter from a personal encounter, and she drifted into renewed reproaches. “‘N’ I wan’t a-doin’ the fust blessed thing—not the fust blessed thing. Oh, I wish ’t I was dead, I do—I do—I don’t care where or how. A grave’s the least important thing o’ life—I wish’t I was dead ’n’ buried under the wet mud where he’d have to lemme be !”

Despairing of finding out the truth from her mother, Maria turned, as a last resort, to her father.

“What a’ ye been doin’ to ’er?” she demanded.

“None o’ yer bizness !” snapped the head of the family.

“I’ll make it some o’ my bizness if ye don’t keep yer paws off ma,” threatened Maria.

“Oh, ye will, will ye?” sneered the father.

“Yes, I will !” she cried, fiercely. “I ain’t a-goin’ to set by ’n’ see ’er ’bused by nobody—much less by a ole coward like you !”

“Never mind, never mind,” quavered the moist woman, drawing her foot out of the coffee-pot and trying to look impressive. “Don’t fight ’n’ quar’l over me—I ain’t nobody. It’ll all come back to ’im after I’m dead. It’s many a pore night’s rest he’ll have then with my sperrit a-moanin’ ’n’ a groanin’ round ’im in the dark. I can’t last forever. I’ve been dyin’ these twenty odd year, ’n’ it’ll soon be over now !”

Ever since the beginning of the controversy Maud Eliza had been sitting in her corner of the wagon indulging in an uninterrupted sequence of snickers that seemed likely to end in asphyxia or dislocation, but at

the prospect of peace conveyed in her mother's resigned tones, she sobered herself by an effort. Peace after war was to her something like prose after poetry. She had felt the need of excitement for some time, and a family broil satisfied a present craving of hers. She seized her apron with both hands in keen expectant delight and whispered across the wagon to Maria :

“I jess soon tell what he done if neither o' *them* won't. He poked 'er in the ribs with the butt o' his gad—that's what he done—'an, made 'er squeak awful, 'n' he done it vicious, 'n' I seen 'im, too !”

CHAPTER III.

A SILENCE fell upon the contentions of the Pugsleys—a moment prophetic of an oncoming rush of moral wind and thunder which put all things in a state of uncertainty and filled the air with the expectation of violent change. One could see Maria's anger rising—it could almost be felt.

Ephraim, who could hardly have upheld his paternal authority even among those Oriental races where to be a father is to have a guaranty of filial reverence, felt a growing dread of the conflict. Maud Eliza, certain that the battle was about to be renewed, caught her breath in a sort of ecstasy, then threw her dingy apron over her head and relapsed into griping convulsions of unrestrained giggles.

Maria's eyes flashed like the eyes of an untamed angry horse. She turned on her father with clenched hands and set teeth.

"Ye poked ma in the ribs with the butt o' yer gad!" she cried.

Mrs. Pugsley, who had been originally of a poetic turn of mind in the days of the Swipeses of Swipes's Bar, opened her eyes at this point and began in a premonitory manner:

"Don't quar'l—don't quar'l 'n' git to hatin' o' each other," she said, weakly attempting the blessed rôle of peacemaker. "The world's wide 'nough to stay in 'thout hatin' o' each other. Hate is darkness 'n' love is light," she added, soaring into sentiment.

But Maria was not in a mood to sentimentalize. She was mastered by a great longing to do something vio-

lently retributive. At these moments of robust indignation she was capable of such lawless deeds as spring from the undisputed egotism of Eastern tyrants. The consideration that the one she proposed to punish was her father had no weight against her impulse of pitiless self-assertion ; the paternal relationship held no sacredness for her ; she only realized that the weak had been maltreated by the strong, and that it was in her power to make the aggressor suffer the full measure of pain he had inflicted. She did not pause to calculate the means by which an equilibrium of justice for her mother could be restored ; she was given up wholly to a blind zeal to assert her disapproval in peremptory actions whose consequences could hardly pass beyond the jurisdiction of her will. The ill, complaining mother had become to her a sort of reservoir for the emotions which had been shut off from other outward leading channels. Her feeling may have been less selfish than that—one phase of that good which makes us all akin, which is deeply hidden, perhaps, like tarnished gold in an Etruscan tomb, but eventually comes forth bright and shining into the open day.

Mr. Pugsley inwardly quailed before the girl, but he had resolved to make a stand. In his domestic government he had never been conscious of more than a spindling outgrowth of that corrective faculty which Nature has implanted vigorously in most men, so that his children had got on with little or no assistance from him and had come to regard his occasional intervention as an unwarrantable interference with the operation of their own sweet wills ; consequently he felt uncertain of his ground at the very beginning of this domestic revolution, and was half-inclined to beat a hasty retreat before engaging in actual combat with his doughty daughter. But, no ; it was well enough for Maria to defend herself when occasion required, but by what right had she constituted

herself the body-guard of her mother? Wasn't he the old woman's rightful protector—her husband? And if he saw nothing wrong in the treatment she received at the hands of people, whose business was it to complain? Not Maria's, surely. The fact was, that girl was getting too big for her clothes—she must be brought to a true knowledge of her relations to superior powers. This thing of her running the whole Pugsley institution had gone far enough. He would be firm with his daughter. He would show her—with the next tavern three hours ahead—that he intended to be master in his own family.

Reinforced by this logic, he turned on his daughter with some spirit.

“Well, what if I *did* poke the old gal in the ribs?” he demanded. “Ain't she my prop'ty to poke in the ribs if I want to?”

Mr. Pugsley felt considerable confidence in his intellectual powers when he devoted them to argument. A girl with Maria's exceptional mental character could hardly fail to see the force of such luminous reasoning. She was a reasonable young woman, Maria was, barring a hint of prejudice which always inclined her to take sides with her mother; and just now her temper seemed a little riled. These two points might lead her into ill-considered judgments, but Mr. Pugsley felt, with a consciousness of firmer nerve tension, that his logic was incontrovertible; and if Maria was not in the mood to admit the superiority of his arguments, why, so much the worse for her.

“By hokey, she *is* my prop'ty,” he cried, with the fiery haste of conviction, “'n' I'm goin' to poke 'er again!”

He raised the whip and pointed the butt of it toward the prostrate woman, ready to give her a sudden thrust. The frightened creature shrieked and shrank back, whimpering helplessly, and huddling herself together to avoid the stroke.

“Don’t—don’t, Ephraim!” she gasped, hysterically, flinging up her hands, but not daring to push the whip aside lest she feel the force of it sooner. “It’ll kill me—I can’t stan’ it agin—please don’t, good, kind Ephraim!” Her voice died away in hoarse, gasping appeal.

Maria flung herself across her mother’s body and shook her fist in the old man’s face. It was the fist of a genuine frontier’s woman—as strong as a man’s, and as ready to caress as to strike.

“Let up on that!” she cried, in a voice that tightened her throat and seemed to choke her. “If ye tetch ’er agin I’ll knock ye stiff—I’ll spatter yer whiskey brains out into the mud!”

She looked a very devil as she raised herself above him with uplifted arms, her cheeks flushed, her dishevelled hair streaming, the red fire burning in her eyes. He felt her breath touch his face hot and quick, and threw up his elbow between her and him, then peered out at her threatening arm.

“I—I ain’t a goin’ to tetch ’er!” he cried in a hasty, terrified voice. “Put down yer arm—don’t strike—I wa’n’t a-goin’ to do nothin.’ I ain’t well, Mariar, ’n’ I can’t stan’ one o’ yer thumpin’s to-day—I can’t, really, I wa’n’t agoin’ to tetch ’er!”

“Oh,” cried the girl with fierce scorn. “Ye wan’t a-goin’ to tetch ’er with yer whip already aimed ’n’ yer han’s a-itchin’, was ye? Oh, no! Put down that air whip, now, quicker ’n the Lord ’ll let ye. Ye’re a fine specimen, ain’t ye, wigglin’ aroun’ there like a bug under a chip! The world’s a-missin’ a heap ’t it ain’t got more like ye, ain’t it now? Bah! Ye ain’t wuth slappin’!”

Mr. Pugsley, though he saw that she probably would not strike, edged farther away from her and sat cringing, with his head drawn down between his shoulders like a frightened tortoise in its shell. He experienced a swift

and grateful sense of deliverance when at last Maria settled back into her place—a feeling which was compensation enough even for the lingering consciousness that he had tottered and fallen flat where he had intended to walk stately. As for Maud Eliza, she had retired again behind her apron and only emerged after several moments when quite limp and exhausted.

The wagon plunged on in splashy silence. The sun grew warmer, the ground steamed. Not a cloud appeared in the void of blue, shapeless air. They passed an opening in the foothills where a milk-white lake lay asleep in the sun with the mists like torn curtains fluttering raggedly about the near heights. The air was full of the sound of the river—such a hymn as the morning stars once sang together; and for a little while a crystal-clear tributary of the river flowed beside the road, with the sunshine beating time on its water to the tinkling melody sung beneath. All else was hushed: the pines on the near foothills were inaudible: there was no wind. But to the eye the landscape spoke. There was a massive eloquence in the wide-reaching gray plain and the desolate foothills—a language of stupendous stoicism and eternal calm. The Pugsleys saw nothing, thought nothing of these externals. They were occupied with the trivial passions of their lives, filled with the petty spites and inconsistencies of egotism, looking forward, backward, sidewise, with an aimlessness which saw in Nature but a pallid reflection of their needs.

Mr. Pugsley regarded the laboring horses attentively for some time. His bleared eyes held an expression of profound meditation, of metaphysical inquiry. He had a coward's respect for the conqueror, and was always anxious to be reconciled to one who was stronger than he. Finally he turned in his seat and looked back at his daughter with grim approval.

“I’ve said it afore, ’n’ I mean it, ’t ye’re the Devil’s

Own, Mariar," he declared in a voice which betrayed involuntary admiration. It was his way of acknowledging his daughter's supremacy.

Maria accepted the compliment as a soldier receives his pay—as the just due of valor and ability. She only blinked slightly. Her father had complimented her in like manner under like circumstances many times before, and she had grown quite accustomed to her title of the Devil's Own, and was even proud of it.

"Ye've got yer father's own grit," proceeded Ephraim, decidedly, but still with something of the timidity inspired by an overawing presence. "N' ye ain't no call to be' shamed o' that. It ain't every gal 't's got a father like your'n to take after. Moreover—"

"It ain't every gal 't's got a father 't she has to take after to keep him from thumpin' 'er mother," suggested Maria.

Mr. Pugsley waived the insinuation.

"Ye must admit, Mariar, it's very tryin' to a man to have to put up with some things sometimes," he said, "They ain't no use talkin' 'n' tryin' to smooth it over, a family *can* be a gummed nuisance wunst in a while." Mr. Pugsley's courage was increasing with the sound of his voice, but he thought best to pronounce his didacticisms in general terms, as the least offensive method of producing an offensive impression.

"Ye seem well 'nough contented with yer fam'ly when yer bottle's full," remarked Maria.

Mr. Pugsley waived this insinuation also.

"The great fault with ye is, Maria," he said in a mildly admonitory tone, "'t ye don't seem to know when a man's playful 'n' when he's in earnest. Ye don't seem to see which is which. Now, ye orter cultervate that air faculty ; no woman's 'magination 's complete 'thout it. It's what ye need 'n' I'll help ye do it, off 'n' on, 's I git

time. I was only foolin'. I jus' wanted to rouse the ole gal up 'n' make 'er feel lively. That's all."

Maria sniffed contemptuously.

"We won't have no more sech rousin' 'n' foolin'," she said, with decision. "It ain't becomin' to a man o' yer age 'n' style o' beauty."

At this choice bit of repartee Maud Eliza giggled till she strangled, and finally sobered up in a condition of utter diaphragmatic collapse. On the whole, the Pugsleys had enjoyed their little quarrel as an agreeable diversion. Ephraim experienced a sense of relief, as if a stop-cock had been thrown open in the reservoir of his wrath, leaving little of the original element behind, and that below the present level of escape. Mrs. Pugsley regarded herself as a martyr visited with peculiar afflictions and endowed with extraordinary powers of meeting them heroically ; while Maria was glad of another opportunity of demonstrating her ability to protect her mother.

The Pugsleys are humanity in its rudimentary state. In them, as in every mother's son of us, are those germs of saints and devils which Nature has implanted in every soul, and whose growth and development blind circumstance determines.

CHAPTER IV.

THE novelist who is bold enough to write of such people as these should make up his mind beforehand to stand constantly in an apologetic attitude between them and the polite reader, offering iterated excuses for their existence, and covering up as best he may their frequent lapses of decency and grammar ; for the ethics of art have long taught that, if vulgar people must be painted, they must be painted picturesquely, inoffensively—in a word, not as they are, with blotched complexions and clothing torn in unmentionable places, but with an ideal barbarity of exterior which pleases and never repels. Leaving out the artistic part of the question, let me say, in extenuation of certain prominent moral delinquencies discoverable in the characters in this book, that probably the best of us have felt at times that this world is a bad place to be good in. Necessarily it is a particularly bad place for the Pugsleys, to whom the stimulus of lofty example has always been lacking, and whose ideas of goodness are of an almost ethereal vagueness. In a fit of spleen Fate has debarred them from those social conditions which adjust men's barbarous intellectual tendencies into harmony with gentleness and sympathy. The saving grace of urbanity is a mystery to them—they lack a perception of relations. Life is at best a great green woodland, in which sweet medicinal herbs grow side by side with fetid poisonous plants, and through which all the winds of heaven sing or thunder ; and if men pluck only nightshade, and hear none but the loud, roaring winds, the fault lies not in

Nature herself, but in a perverted exercise of sensibilities bestowed for a keener, nicer discrimination of things. And this perversion is a misfortune, hardly a crime.

I can but think that humanity is its own excuse for being ; a skilled hand has painted us in light and shadow—a hand whose work is “good,” transcending criticism ; and the shadows no less than the light are needed to make up the picture. We may at least learn the sweet lesson of pity by studying the lowly uses to which humanity lends itself. And we may utilize men as outer consciences : for the hatefulness of a vicious life in another may become a dominant reason for rightly living our own. It is but fair to remember that absolute purity lies only in infinite knowledge ; glimpses of this purity, of this knowledge, broaden and become more frequent as time goes on ; they are the light by which men lay noble deeds for the upbuilding of the world’s rising structure of good—the converting light which shines even where black ignorance and crime seem to make such psychical architecture impossible. The Pugsleys of this world are never without certain elements of magnanimity and generous human feeling ; there is hope for them individually as for mankind collectively, whose beginning was a handful of dust and a divine inspiration. If in the illest-shaped human figure there is a beauty and grace of God’s own making, of what infinite capability must be the human soul, whose garment and obstruction the body is ?

But the Pugsleys are not introspective—they are boisterously contented with themselves ; and the future to them looks promising enough if it appears no worse than the present. Bobbing and reeling ubiquitously in unison with their incalculable wagon, the interesting family labored onward. The air grew hotter ; the mud became like tar as the sun rose higher. Yet the heat was all in the valley, for on some of the higher levels there had

been a slight snowfall the night before, and it had not yet melted from the sage-brush and manzanita bushes that dappled the foothills like flocks of sheep. Here were gray chasms, scarred by the blows of a thousand torrents ; there a red and yellow mesa lay straight and shining as a brazen ruler against the sunny heights beyond it. Anon a foaming torrent plunged over its vertical precipice, half hid in spray, flung heavenward like the arms of despairing, suicidal women. But the travelers saw nothing of sky or mountain, of tree or waterfall. They had become scenery-hardened long ago, and had learned to tolerate nature with grim, passive endurance as an unavoidable adjunct of their material life. The agonies of slow travel have often been described at, but never touched in, their actuality. The indifference to everything but personal discomfort which gradually settles down upon the sprightliest spirit becomes in time tragic ; and a stage of misery has been reached by civilized beings even in this age of smooth surfaces, when the all-sufficiency of well-curled bangs,—hitherto an unquestioned article of religious belief—becomes a subject of painful doubt in the feminine mind.

Mr. Pugsley reflected on the quarrel just ended. Decidedly he was feeling less malevolent than before. To be sure, he had been worsted, and Maria had come out on top ; but that was a matter of course. Maria had been coming out on top ever since he could remember, and he would have been surprised and disgusted at any other result. The main point gained was that Mrs. Pugley had been made to understand her helplessness and dependence. It had been shown to his satisfaction that she was unconditionally his personal property ; that if he chose to poke her with a stick, he would do it ; and she might infer, as an incentive to good conduct in future, that, if he chose to pitch her out of the wagon, he would do that

also—providing that Maria was nowhere in the neighborhood to interfere. Mr. Pugsley's unconditional right to treat his wife as he chose was thus modified by very express conditions, which he dared by no means ignore ; but the fact remained that she was there, to be made miserable whenever his own misery became unbearable in its loneliness and required company.

His surviving irritation led him into broad generalizations.

“ Wimmin is all sprouts o' the devil,” he remarked, flinging the words over his shoulder into the wagon, and wishing that they were pebbles that could wound and bruise.

But he received no answer. Maud Eliza did not even titter, and Mrs. Pugsley did not even groan.

“ The man 't gits married 's warmin' hot water fer hisself,” he continued more assertively. He paused long enough to give each of the horses a cut with his whip, and then, receiving no answer, went on :

“ What a man wants to git married fer 's more 'n I can see. They ain't no comfort in it—they ain't no sense in it ; but everybody does it, jes' like they had to. Seems like marriage follers single blessedness the way death follers life—it's a piece o' nater 'n' nat'ral misforshun. Eh ! it's hard swimmin' with a mill-stun round the neck, 'n' hard livin' with a passel o' wimmin draggin' a man down, down—clean down to the very bottom o' the bottomless. No wonder I git tired o' it ; didn't the Lord Hissself wunst git weary 'n' want rest ? Leeches 'n' blood-suckers ain't nothin' 'longside o' wimmin ; buzzards 'n' coyotes ain't a patchin' to 'em. If they's anything 't 'll rob a man o' talent o' his nat'ral gifts, 'n' turn his genyus into fat fer their gummed bones, it's—” here Mr. Pugsley sawed the air in the enthusiasm of his figure—“ it's—by hokey !—its wimmin ! ”

Still no answer. Mr. Pugsley looked over his shoulder to discover the cause of this unusual silence. Maud Eliza was staring stupidly at the wagon-track behind her and thrumming with the fingers of one hand against the back of the other. Mrs. Pugsley lay quite still, with closed eyes, looking very pale and creased and damp. Maria was drawing her hair through her fingers in default of a comb, preparatory to doing it up. The singular disposition of the women to keep quiet encouraged Mr. Pugsley to enlarge upon his grievances. He was a man of extremes, always supremely blessed or supremely miserable, never even crudely philosophical, as are many of his class. To him it was a comfort to din his troubles into other ears, no matter whether he was listened to impatiently or not at all. He had no understanding of the exegesis of causes—no conception of the truth that an exposition of the wrongs dealt to the individual is a statement, clear as in figures, of the wrongs dealt by the individual.

“Fat?” cried he, turning again to the horses, but speaking loud enough for the women to hear. “Fat, did I say? Fat, ’nough fer a hull pen o’ pigs, which ’ud pay fer their keep, as is more ’n wimmin does. How in the name o’ Hanner they manage to keep so fat, I can’t see—”

“Nor I, nuther,” interrupted Maria, grimly. “Specially ma.” And then Maud Eliza tittered fit to kill herself and recovered with a series of liquid gurgles like the sound of water poured from a small-mouthed bottle.

“What I want,” continued Mr. Pugsley, with the air of one who has studied a subject impartially from different points of view, “is wimmin folks ’t’s got common-sense. This ’ere thing o’ havin’ a pack o’ fools forever follern’ after ye, grows mighty wearn’. What I want—”

“Bah! we hear ducks!” cried Maria in derision.

“What I want—” recommenced Ephraim in a louder voice, twisting his head and pointing his words with a didactic finger. But Maria interrupted him again.

“What ye want’s a watch-pocket under yer eye!” She cried. And Maud Eliza threw herself back and snorted.

“Well, don’t quar’l” said Mrs. Pugsley, formally, from her blankets. “The world’s wide ’nough ’thout that. ’N’ I’ve said it to ye many a time afore.”

“Oh, we ain’t quar’lin’, ma. I’m jes’ ’preciatin’ dad’s conversation. It’s *so* interestin’.”

“I’d rather have the perrykids o’ Egypt into the wagin ’n’ three sech great hulkin’ chunks o’ flesh,” proceeded Mr. Pugsley, regarding Maria’s irony as a recognition of his right to a larger freedom of speech. “No wonder we don’t git ahead—no wonder the hosses is givin’ out, ’n’ I’m so thin ye could see daylight through me if the sun was in the right place.”

“Nobody’s denyin’ ye’re *oncommon* thin,” put in Maria. and Maud Eliza snorted again, as in duty bound.

“What the Bible means by encouragin’ o’ matrimony’s more ’n’ I can see,” cried the father, warming up to the subject. “Git up, there, Bonypart, if ye want to keep yer skin hull.”

And he showered on his dejected steeds the blows which he felt belonged by right to the exasperating women of his own family.

The black adobe valley stretched out on all sides as waste and barren as the primordial firmament of heaven. If there had only been a bit of grass somewhere in sight on that great level, Mr. Pugsley would not have felt so aggrieved, though he had no practical use for grass at present and certainly experienced no ecstatic emotion at the sight of vernal, growing things. There was a little grass on the southern slopes of the foothills, but Mr. Pugsley did not want it there; he wanted it where it had not

chosen to grow. He wanted everything as it had not chosen to be. He wished that power had been given him to order the grass and other things about; there would soon be an improvement in the workings of this worldly machine. Taverns *ad infinitum* would approach at the word of command and follow that battered emigrant wagon in blissful, orderly obedience; and what a paradise that would make of this hideous, black, sticky valley!

Our stomachs are the source of most our prayers. "Lord, send us quickly to the next tavern!" prayed Mr. Pugsley under his breath.

A sudden jolt of the wagon brought a prolonged groan from Mrs. Pugsley.

Ephraim chuckled hoarsely.

"It's good fer ye, old gal;" he chuckled in malicious enjoyment. "It'll stir ye up 'n' make ye healthy. Ye loll aroun' too much. That's the matter o' ye—ye loll aroun' too much!"

"Oh, Ephraim!" articulated Mrs. Pugsley in weak protest.

Ephraim expectorated grimly on the horses' flanks. A wife may be a comfort to her husband when she is a discomfort to herself.

"Ye was allus hard on me," said the moist woman, feeling herself an object of reprobation. "Ye never was proud o' me—nobody ever was sens I was a Swipes. 'N' I never do nothin'—never. There's room 'nough in the world fer all," she added, irrelevantly.

"If ye'd been made to work fer yer livin' from the very first start 'stid o' settin' up fer a fine lady in pore health 'n' doin' nothin' but spreadin' yerself out on the flat o' yer back from mornin' till night, ye wouldn't a-got in sech a helpless state. Ye'd a flaxed aroun' 'n' kep' healthy—that's what's kep' me a-goin' all these years."

"Dear, dear," cut in Maria, ironically. "Did any one

ever see sech a sweet, purty man? Did any one ever see anything slicker 'n' a peeled onion afore?"

Mr. Pugsley disregarded the sarcasm. His conscious inability to cope with his daughter kept his fault-finding confined to his wife.

"I've been too good to ye," he declared. "I've been too good to the hull kit 'n' possey o' ye. I've harbored ye 'n' clothed ye 'n' fed ye. I've had ye follerin' aroun' after me—"

"Oh, the dear critter!" interrupted Maria with a burst of unnatural affection. "Ma, ma, d'ye reckon it 'ud lemme kiss it?"

"Mebbe 't would if ye'd coax it," suggested Maud Eliza, from the intricacies of one of her giggling fits.

"Oh, jes' wunst, pa!" cried Maria, clasping her hands in dramatic pleading, "jes', jes' wunst, 'n' then—lemme die!"

"Shet up!" cried Ephraim, sternly. "Ain't a man got a right to finish what he starts to say in his own fam'ly?"

"Let yer dad speak, gals," put in Mrs. Pugsley, oracularly, from her blankets. "Go on, Ephraim dear, we're listenin'."

"Maud Eliza," cried Maria, in a severe tone, "I'm 'shamed o' ye—ye call the blush o' shame all over my face 'n' halfway down my back. Stop that air gigglin' this instant 'n' cross yer hands 'n listen' respectful to yer lovin' father."

CHAPTER V.

A MAN'S faults in the eyes of his family are likely to become enlarged like nervous tissue under the microscope, their increased size making them unrecognizable as a part of the marital organism. To-day Mr. Pugsley was more than ever sure that Maria exaggerated his shortcomings—a freak of judgment altogether wrong in a girl having faults of her own which he might exaggerate, too, if he were unfair enough to take an uncharitable advantage. Considering everything, he could fairly congratulate himself on being a very good husband and father. He had always provided for his family. There was still a dish of cold beans wrapped up in a gunnysack in a corner of the wagon, and, if he remembered correctly—and he was not likely to forget such particulars—there was a small wedge of johnny-cake left over from breakfast. A man who provides for his family like that in hard times may reasonably be considered a good fellow. He wondered, somewhat anxiously whether that greedy Maud Eliza had gobbled the johnny-cake in one of the intervals of her giggling. It would be just like her—it was in her part of the wagon. And, if she had, the whole outfit of them might go hungry and be hanged, for he proposed to enter into negotiations with the bar-keeper at Havilah at about noon to-day, and six bits was little enough for the purpose.

In the midst of these meditations Mrs. Pugsley raised herself on one elbow and gazed about her with the blankness of inanition. She looked very moist and slippery among her blankets—like the neglected daughter of an ancient river, fated to grow old but never die.

“It’s rainin’ up there on the foot hills,” she said, in a helpless, purposeless way, “’N’ they wa’n’t a cloud no-here a little while ago. I thought it was goin’ to clear off ’n’ gimme a chance to enjoy life again. But that’s jes’ the way; even the weather’s agin’ me ’n’ has a spite at me.

It must a-snowed up there las’ night, too, ’n’ the rocks is all damp, ’n’ the sky is damp ’n’ everything’s damp, ’n’ I’ve got a pain in my lef’ side that’s twistin the life out o’ me.”

Her enumeration of all the wet places in the landscape was about as interesting to Ephraim as a scientific classification of animals would have been. He gave his horses an extra cut with his whip and kept silent.

“I hope the rain won’t come down ’ere,” went on Mrs. Pugsley, with the look of one who has been identified with humidity for a term of years and would now like a change. “I’m glad o’ the sunshine. It feels good, fallin’ onto me ’n’ soakin’ into my bones. I wish’t the wagon didn’t have no top, so ’t I could git more o’ the sun.”

Maria laughed, showing her firm white teeth.

“I don’t see’s takin’ the waggin-top ’ud make much difference,” she said. “The sun seems to get through it ’thout much trouble.”

Mrs. Pugsley pushed back her straggling locks and waved a sticky hand in deprecation.

“That’s jes’ the way with ye, Mariar,” she sighed with the dreary monotony of purposelessness. “That’s jes’ the way ye allus was. Ye ain’t got no feelin’—ye’d ’s lief set in shadder’s sunshine. Ye’re all Pugsley in that—not a grain o’ Swipes. The Swipeses was all fond o’ the sun—they had southern blood into ’em. Why, Dad Swipes ’ud set aroun’ the door o’ the saloon from mornin’ till night doin’ nothin’ but enjoyin’ his pipe in the sunshine. Oh, Lord, the side o’ me ’ll bust off yit, I know’t will!”

“I wish ’t I had some o’ that Liver Exterminator ’t I

seen advertised in big red letters," said Maria with solicitude. "I know it ud do ye good. It said it ud cure anything."

Mrs. Pugsley settled back among her blankets like one who watches his own grave dug and is determined not to mind.

"No—no," she said, in the deposed empress tone which she assumed at times, twisting her clammy fingers together and rolling her head from side to side. "They couldn't cure everything—they's things as wa'n't made to be cured, 'n' I'm one o' 'em. Death's been campin' on my trail for years, 'n' now here 'tis. 'Tain't no use bein' a Swipes; 't ain't no use runnin' away: the faster I run the sooner I'll tumble into the hole 't 's been dug fer me. No—no. They ain't no cure fer the likes o' me in this 'ere world. What's the use o' a kittle when it's all cracked 'n' busted every which way? Not 't I'd compare a Swipes to a cracked kittle," she added with a sudden assumption of transitory dignity. "It's only the crackin,—the pain. Now ye see what 'tis to be well brought up 'n' have to come down. Mariar—Mariar," she wailed, abruptly relinquishing her dignity and becoming low-spirited again. "I'm a pore critter as the world treads on. Nobody keers fer me!"

"Oh, come, come, ma," said Maria, cheerfully. "Don't go to takin' on, don't go to gittin' down in the mouth 'n' feelin' blue. Things 'll come out all right by'm'by."

"Fer you, yes; fer me, no," quavered Mrs. Pugsley in antithesis and tears. "I wish't the green grass was growin' over me, I do---I do!"

"So d' I!" put in Ephraim, as devoutly as if responding in the litany.

Mrs. Pugsley wept in ostentatious silence for several moments, her tears falling upon her general moistness with an effect similar to a spring shower on the sea.

“What’s the use o’ livin’ when dyin’ ’s easier?” she began presently, conscious of what seemed to her the dawning of a new idea. “’Tain’t nothin’ to die—it’s livin’ ’t uses a critter up. I wish I was dead ’n’ gone ’n’ nothin’ left o’ me but my bones a-rottin’ in the dark. I could have some comfort then, the dead don’t know their own fergittin’.”

“Oh, no danger o’ fergittin’ *you*,” broke in Ephraim with intense feeling.

“La, ma, they’s lots ’n’ lots o’ things to live fer yit. Jes’ think, now! S’posin’ dad was to up ’n’ strike a gold mine—wouldn’t ye be glad ye wasn’t dead, then? ’N’ they do it here in Havilah wunst in a while, even now, I’ve heard say. ’N’ then—la, what wouldn’t we do? Wouldn’t we paint the earth red? ’N’ here ye’re talkin’ ’s if dyin’ was the glory o’ livin’. Oh, ma!”

Ephraim turned impatiently.

“When I strike a gold mine,” he declared, “the first thing I’ll see to ’ll be a divorce, ye can bet yer pile on that. I wish’t the devil wanted ye ’n’ ’ud take ye, the hull passel o’ ye!” he added, firing the words over his shoulder as if they were bomb-shells.

“Looks like he’s got us a’ready,” remarked Maria in her serenest voice. “Ye’re the head o’ the fam’ly, ain’t ye?”

“Oh, Mariar, Mariar!” cried Maud Eliza with a snort and a strangle. “What a critter ye be—what a critter ye be! Ye’re a caution to snakes—ye’re enough to kill corns!”

Here Mrs. Pugsley dried her eyes with a showy exertion of her will, and turning to her husband asked in the voice of a confirmed invalid who wishes to appear particularly patient:

“Ain’t we ’most there, Ephraim, dear?”

“’Most where?” growled Mr. Pugsley.

“ ‘Most there—where we’re goin’—I fergit the name o’ the place. Ye know my mem’ry was allus pore. All the Swipeses had pore mem’ries, fust ‘n’ last.”

“ I hope ye’re most where ye’re goin’ after ye’re dead ! ” snarled Ephraim.

“ There, now—let up on that, *you!* ” cried Maria, warningly. And Ephraim fell to examining the mountains.

“ It don’t matter what he says,” quavered the moist woman, determined to be resigned. “ It’s all been said fifty times afore ‘n’ I’m used to it. It don’t matter—it’s only me. Let ‘im go on—he won’t have me long to buse ‘n’ knock aroun.’ Oh, Lord,” she groaned, with sudden appeal to interrogation, “ why was I borned to be knocked ‘n’ battered aroun’ in this ‘ere ridic’lous way? Why ain’t I dead ‘n’ gone like the rest o’ the decent folks? This ‘ere wide world ain’t no place for the likes o’ me.”

“ There, there, ma,” said Maria, as if soothing a fretful child.

The occupants of the wagon were silent for some moments having exhausted their ordinary resources of conversation. The light on the foothills grew and filled its little spot of sky with soft gray shadows ; a distant mountain backed one nearer and similar in shape, looking like the penumbra of the latter through the mist ; elsewhere the sunshine fell deep and peaceful. The wind had risen, and they could occasionally catch the music of the pines ; now and again they were near enough to the foothills to feel the chill fall of shadows from rock and peak ; near enough to the river, too, to hear its muffled sound—a sibilant murmur through wide spaces of air, like the distant beating of many wings.

“ I hope there’ll be plenty o’ men there, to Havilah—young men, I mean,” remarked Maud Eliza with considerable seriousness. “ O’ course there’ll be plenty o’ old ‘uns. Seems to me like we ain’t never been nowheres ‘t

the men wa'n't all a-gittn' purty well on in years 'n' kind o' ruinous."

"I've allus found 'nough o' both kinds," said Maria. "I never noticed no signs o' the breed dyin' out."

"Yes, the young 'uns was allus on the canter after you," declared Maud Eliza, with bitterness, "but I never got into a man's eye yit 't wa'n't old 'nough to be my daddy. Ye allus had plenty to pick 'n' choose from, 'n' I don't why ye don't freeze onto one o' em 'n' give *me* a chance. It's hoggish—that's what it is, 'n' if ye was a lady ye'd a-stopped it long ago."

This was a subject on which Maud Eliza felt deeply, and which had early confirmed in her a republican belief in the injustice of the advantages of primogeniture. When she was at liberty to discourse at length on her wrongs she usually employed the historical method of treating the subject, beginning with an early admirer who had been drawn from her to her sister, and pursuing a chronological sequence of similar instances down to the present day—now and then transcending the limits of time and circumstance and bearing away into a wild prophetic future, in which she constrained history to repeat itself through cycles of disappointment and spinsterhood. However, it was evident that Maud Eliza was not hopeless of a shaping of events which should ultimately evolve a matrimonial victim, for even in her most reproachful moods she had been known to titter in delighted anticipation. Maria always experienced something like disgust at these demonstrations. She never could understand what a woman wanted of a husband. It seemed to her that men were at best a poor makeshift of the **Creator** at a moment when there was a scarcity of good feminine material.

"Well, there!" she said, when Maud Eliza had finished her tirade; "ye've fired yer wad, 'n' can keep still a

while, I hope. I'd like to see the feller I'd let come lally-gaggin' aroun' *me*."

"Ah, Lord A'mighty," cried Maud Eliza with irony. "Ain't she greens? Don't she think she's some?" And she went off into a fit of grasping her nose and strangling.

"When Mariar gets married," Ephraim condescended to say with a touch of fatherly pride, "she'll make it snow fer some o' 'em, ye can bet yer life o' that. She's the Devil's Own, Mariar is!"

"It's nat'ral for a gal to want to git a man," put in Mrs. Pugsley as if touching upon a subject which demanded nothing less than her own large previous knowledge before it could be pursued to advantage. "I 'member how 'twas with me when I was a gal."

"Them orter have 'em 't wants 'em," said Maria.

"'N' Maud Eliza does want 'em, o' course, 'n' quite right," declared Mrs. Pugsley, regarding her younger daughter with complaisance. "She's all Swipes, Maud Eliza is, in that. There never was a Swipes 't didn't marry young; it's allus been the remarks o' people 't the hull breed o' Swipeses went off like hot cakes. It's their nater—it's in the blood."

"Well, I'd like to know what a woman's fer if 'tain't to git married?" challenged Maud Eliza, conscious of the advantage of defending a conventional idea.

"Nothin' 't I know on," answered Maria, grimly. "To git married 'n' be knocked aroun' instid o' a sand-bag when their husban's is drunk—that's what wimmin's made fer."

"'N' I intend to git married the very fust chance," continued Maud Eliza. "'N' I'd rather have a young man 'n a old 'un any day, though I'd ruther have an old 'un 'n none at all."

Mrs. Pugsley brightened like a mist in sudden sunshine.

“D’ye hear that, Ephraim?” she cried with joy. “She’s Swipes all over!”

Maud Eliza tittered her acknowledgments.

“Though, for the matter o’ that,” pursued the moist woman with an air of rightful ownership, “I allus knowed it from the very fust start ’t she was ’er mother’s own child ’n’ took after the family. Maud Eliza,” she added in solemn adjuration, “ye’ve started right; a gal orter marry,—she orter try to make ’er own market ’cause they’s more satisfaction in it ’n what they is in dependin’ on her parents. I’m yer own mother, ’n’ I tell ye fer yer own good ’t ye orter marry; ’n’ I’ve had experience.”

Maria smiled. It was one of her mother’s inconsistencies to insist on the wisdom of her marriage even while she deplored the consequences of it.

Ephraim was silent, but not from lack of interest in the subject. Indeed, speculations on this very theme at odd times had revealed to him latent powers of imagination which he had never suspected; and he had often dramatized himself present at the first meeting of one of his daughters with a good-natured son-in-law elect, looking on as benignantly as Deity might have done when Eve was presented to Adam. He had also allowed his imagination to picture himself wandering blissfully against an infinitely varied background of saloon sign-boards, the recipient of regularly-paid sums of money sufficient for a man’s necessary expenses. He believed Maria might have been married long ago if she had wished. Her objections were inexplicable.

Mrs. Pugsley was just opening her lips for another ebullition of maternal instruction when there was a premonitory steady sinking of the front wheels of the wagon, a soft settling together of thick mud around the hubs, then motionless silence. Maria at the rear of the wagon could hear the tired horses breathe as they laid them-

selves forward to the ground in their attempt to go on. Mr. Pugsley cut at the poor beasts furiously with his whip, roaring and cursing like one possessed. But all to no purpose. The wagon would not move. Presently the horses, dead tired with their hard morning's labor, and realizing the uselessness of further exertion, settled back loosely in their traces and submitted to his vicious lashings without the quivering of a muscle.

He had owned the animals long enough to know what that meant. They were worse than Maria when they had made up their minds as to what they wouldn't do. With ludicrous suddenness he lapsed from imprecation to invitation in the desperate hope that a change of tone might induce a change of intention in the worn-out beasts.

"Good ponies!" he said in a voice of smothered passion which he tried to make tender with pleading.

But the horses did not budge.

"Git up!" he proceeded in a tone of gentle inducement.

Still they did not move.

"Get up!" he repeated, wheedlingly.

This mild request being also disregarded, he howled at the top of his voice:

"Git up, there, Bonyparte, d—n ye, or I'll splinter the dumburned ribs o' ye!"

But the wagon was stuck fast. Mr. Pugsley sank back with a hollow groan. Travellers were few and far between at that season, and no help could be expected from other sources. And the tavern at Havilah—

The much-tried man turned purple. There is a limit even to extreme forbearance; and we know that the gods themselves were capable of anger.

With a sudden movement, implying that chaos had come again, he flung the reins upon the horses' backs and leaped out into the mud. Next, he deliberately

kicked the nearest horse in the ribs, grunting with a sense of ease as he did so; then he walked around the wagon kicking each wheel impartially in turn and finished up in an orderly manner on the ribs of the other horse. After that, he seized a muddy wheel in both hands and stood shaking it in breathless, impotent rage. Then catching sight of Mrs. Pugsley's frightened face peering out through a rent in the canvas, he made a blind, murderous dash at her and commenced clambering into the wagon directly at her side.

"I'll larn ye!" he yelled, clutching and clawing to get in, "I'll larn ye, ye jade!"

Mrs. Pugsley had never before seen her husband so murderously angry. She drew back screaming, and calling in a terrified voice for Maria.

But before Ephraim's perceptions were able to overcome the momentum of his emotions he felt a shock at both ends of his spine and an instant later was conscious of an identity like his own seated in the mud by the roadside with Maria's strong hands in the region of his collar and Maria's face close to his like an avenging fury. In another instant he felt himself seized and lifted and then abandoned to the iron grasp of gravity; which process, interspersed regularly with a series of dull splashes in the mud, was continued all day long, it seemed to him. And when it finally ceased he discovered that he was seated in the road, under a sky full of uncertain suns, his hat beside him, and Maud Eliza tittering at him from behind a rag of the wagon cover. He glanced around him helplessly, then by degrees he commenced to weep, until in the course of two or three minutes Pius Æneas himself might have envied that flow of tears. Oh, what a place this world was! What had it been created for, anyway? And he a man, too, to be treated like this. The thought formed a stage in the approach of unconsciousness. Pres-

ently he ceased weeping and experienced a gradual sense of fading out into nothing. Then his mind became a blank.

As for Mrs. Pugsley, the sight of her husband in that condition seemed only less terrible than the sight of him clambering into the wagon with murder in his eyes, and she collected herself for a prolonged outburst of wailing and lachrymation; but a sense of inadequate powers constrained her, and she sank back with a decrescendo of moist groans, and lay quite still, in wet, tragic passivity. Maria, calm in the persuasion that she had done her duty, climbed back into the wagon and sat there quietly, listening to the river which flowed close at hand. The novel motionlessness of the wagon was not unpleasant to her; it gave her a chance to rest her back against the wagon-box without danger of dislocation. And then, she could hear the river so much plainer; and she had always liked the music of water lapping its margin softly and mingling with the hoarser sound of the middle current.

She bent over and smoothed back her mother's disordered, unhealthy locks, and tucked the tumbled blankets into more comfortable order. Words of endearment would have sounded strange on her lips; had they come to her she would have left them unuttered from a sense of restraint and shame. Her education, or lack of education, had unfitted her for the expression of any slighter emotions than indignation and wrath. Her feelings were sealed up within her; she herself was not distinctly conscious of any of them except anger. There had been no influence about her from her babyhood up to develop her affections; everything had tended to blunt her sensibilities, to make her coarse and unwomanly. Her material wants were supplied when she had three

meals a day ; her spiritual life was complete when her father's supply of grog was such as to insure her mother against ill-treatment. There were times, indeed, when remote influences touched and stirred her, when faint voices reached her inward ear brokenly, as if they could tell her glad tidings, were she not so far away. Sometimes when she sat by running water until the sound filled her brain and benumbed all power of thought beyond the slow consciousness of freedom and rhythm, she had come to herself with a start, and her past seemed for a time like the memory of an insane hour ; and sometimes when she watched the stars—the good thoughts of angels before they became angels—a momentary shivering desire came over her to be like them, immutable and high and pure. But conceptions of a better life did not insist themselves upon her, did not trouble her except as vague suggestions, formless against gloom. Her history was as simple as that of a crystal : she existed, and grew from the outside.

And yet the woman's nature in her, working as silently and resistlessly as the circulation of her blood, feeling the need of something to care for that its claims to existence might not be ignored, had gradually centered all its dumb, instinctive craving on the ill-used, complaining mother, whose weakness was a constant appeal to the daughter's generosity and strength. Maria's regard for her mother was not love nor tenderness, nor even affection, as we understand those terms. It was the armed outgoing of a strong nature for the protection of the weak, a sympathetic resentment for injury and injustice ; it was an instinct rather than a reason, an emotion of the body rather than of the soul. But it was her closest approach to womanhood thus far, and there had been times as long ago as she could remember when a sense of misery crept

over her at the thought of hearing no more the mother's insistent wailing and complaining. It was the only demand that had ever been made upon her spiritual energies, and to lose it was like losing the power of locomotion.

The true sources of character are a thousand insignificant rivulets among the unexplored hills and valleys of experience. Maria's life, with its impetuous shallows, its dangerous pools and muddy currents was by no means a picturesque or inviting stream in the human landscape ; but there was good, wholesome sunshine upon it, and here and there a thread of crystal clearness forced its way through the turbid waters, never wholly losing itself in the darker currents around it. She was a creature of large possibilities. Nature had done much for her to begin with, but Maria had never learned to fill up with Art the places left vacant by Nature. Life had made no definite impression upon her, but the future would make or mar her. Her virtues were in reality monstrosities, deformed in obvious ways, like the fabled race of men who could hide under their own ears, or at best, ridiculous in some less important feature, like the deities in Egyptian hieroglyphics who have no hair. As for love, it had never touched her, except to move her to laughter or scorn. There was a "fierceness of maidenhood" which built a barrier of reserve and fear between her and those who would approach too closely. Her convictions as to what she wanted and did not want were fixed and insuperable ; and she was perfectly sure she did not want a husband. One husband in the Pugsley family was enough, and her mother was welcome to him.

Maria lived as the trees do among the rocks ; she had grown quietly into the distorted shape into which circumstances crowded her, yet was ignorant of her deformity,

never having known the rectitude of symmetry. Her most vivid recollections outside the repeated family "rows," in which she played so prominent a part, were of several never-to-be-forgotten occasions when she had been obliged to go longer without eating than was conducive to the comfort of her insides.

CHAPTER VI.

“HELLO, there, old 'un ! What's up ? Got stuck 'n' can't pull loose ?”

Mr. Pugsley's mental blankness had changed to a haunting half-consciousness that he was dead, and that instead of being buried decently, he had been left by his family—even in death his domestic troubles were with him—to a gradual decay in the foreground of a moist, unlovely landscape. He was not sure of distinguishing rightly the words which broke in upon this condition of nightmare, but the hearty human voice touched him with a thrill of generous warmth and seemed to stay for a moment the process of dissolution. He opened his eyes and gazed around him like a partially resurrected body on Judgment Day ; he looked down at his legs, at his hands, doubting that they belonged to him. Had he awakened in the land of spirits ? And was this his spiritual body or the same old mass of earthly flesh, blood, and thirstiness from which he had hoped he was parted forever ? And the smiling, red-headed stranger yonder, astride a strong gray horse and leading its mate of exactly the same size and color—what vision, what dream of a vision was that ? For of course it could not be real. Either it was a phantom conjured up by an overwrought sense of frustration and misery, or a celestial horseman out for an airing in the fields of Paradise.

Yes, he must be dead, and this was a messenger sent to bear him to the realms of bliss and perpetually satisfied thirst.

“How long 've I been dead ? 'N' who the devil air

ye?" He articulated with as much difficulty as if using his voice for the first time in years; then he held up his muddy hands and shook his head at them in mournful gravity. "They ain't mine, I can take my dyin' oath o' that. My han's had more feelin' in 'em 'n' what them air woodeny things 's got. They've gone 'n' made a mistake—they've give me the wrong han's."

The stranger laughed, comprehending Mr. Pugsley's psychic entanglement. He had a pleasant laugh altogether.

"Ye can't seem to take me all in, ole feller," he said, in the informal tone of one who is assured of being in the presence of friends. He pulled at the rope by which he led the second horse, and the big animal splashed obediently forward a step or two. "Lord, I'm reel 'nough, nobody ain't reeler 'n' I be. I ain't no ghost 'n' ain't got no intentions o' bein', 'n' don't ye fergit it!"

Maud Eliza, who had been tittering all day for her own amusement, now thrust her head from behind the wagon cover to titter for the amusement of the stranger, and was paid for her trouble by a facetious nod and wink.

"Ye jes' bet I'm reel," he declared with smiling decision.

Mr. Pugsley rose with difficulty to his feet. He looked like a vertical mud-puddle miraculously endowed with powers of locomotion.

"Ye're a rather hard-lookin' pilgrim," remarked the stranger with another laugh. It seemed an easy, habitual thing for him to laugh. His life overflowed with such unreasoning happiness as does running water, a flash in the sun. W'y, ye look like ye'd been a-settin' down in the mud—darn my fool soul if ye don't!"

At this graceful *bon mot* Maud Eliza exploded with a hollow sound, and retired precipitately behind the wagon-cover to collect the fragments.

There was evidently no intentional sarcasm in the stranger's personalities, and Mr. Pugsley saw none. His mind had commenced to act again, but not critically, as the stranger seemed to expect. A sudden hope filled him. There was still something to live for; there was still whiskey in the world—perhaps in this traveller's pocket. Mr. Pugsley seemed to grow broader and taller in accommodation for this growing faith.

“Whoever ye be,” he cried, cordially. “I’m roarin’ glad to see ye, ’n’ d’ye happen to have a drop o’ nose-paint anywheres about yer clo’ses?”

“Ye may lay yer las’ dollar I have,” was the equally cordial response. “Never go out o’ doors ’thout it. ’Taint safe in this country. Snake-bites, ye know!” Here the stranger produced a comfortable-looking bottle and handed it to Mr. Pugsley with a knowing wink.

Ephraim returned the wink fraternally with his bleared left eye, while he raised the bottle to his lips with a long, delicious, anticipatory sigh.

“Here’s lookin’ at ye, stranger,” he said. And then there was an interval of silent ecstasy.

“I wish’t I could run onto a flowin’ spring o’ that stuff,” he remarked, after a long pull, and a strong pull holding the bottle at arm’s length and regarding it with affectionate admiration. “I’d build a homestid ’n’ settle down to a comf’table ole age—that’s what I’d do!”

He took another blissful draught and then gave a moist, convivial wink at the landscape in a general way.

Maud Eliza had got herself together in tolerable shape again and had thrown back a part of the canvas so that the interior of the wagon was exposed to the stranger’s view. Maria was sitting cross-legged and composed like a Turk, while Mrs. Pugsley lay, apparently unconscious of everything, even of the sun’s shining into her half-open mouth. The young man turned toward the women with

a knowing look, at the same time nodding sidewise at Ephraim as if appreciating the old 'un's enjoyment and calling on them to participate with the due heartiness of consanguinity. Especially his eye rested on Maria, who did not seem particularly pleased.

At Ephraim's mention of a homestead beside a flowing spring of whiskey, Mrs. Pugsley stirred feebly and raised herself on her elbow, shaking her head drearily.

"Ye wouldn't git no comfort out o' sech a homestid if ye had it," she croaked, clutching at the side of the wagon as if to save herself from gliding down a slippery incline. "They'd be dozens o' squatters claimin' they was there afore ye was borned. They ain't no comfort in this 'eer world, nohow ; 'n' they ain't no use tryin'. Everything's wrong 'n' crooked."

"There, dad, that's 'nough," cried Maria, somewhat sharply, as Mr. Pugsley removed the bottle from his lips once more and stood clasping it protectingly in both hands. "Now give back the bottle. Three swigs like them 's 'nough for anybody. Ye don't want more 'n, jes' what'll make ye feel good—ye'll be howlin' drunk if ye keep on. He allus howls when he gits too full," she added in explanation to the stranger. She made not the slightest effort to cloak her father's failings. Indeed, she had become so accustomed to them, and had seen so little else in the twenty years of her life, that she had learned to regard them as one phase of the natural order of things and hardly as failings at all. In the social sense, she was as primitive, as rudimental as protoplasm itself. For the weaknesses of the masculine character she had a crude limited forbearance which she indulged, inasmuch as it strained her powers of admonition less than a spirit of intolerance, and implied various superior traits of her own.

Mr. Pugsley handed back the bottle compliantly. It

was wonderful to observe the effect of a little warmth on his inside. His face beamed with satisfaction. His bleared left eye winked indiscriminately at the river, the mountains and the sky, as if including them in a convivial fraternity with himself; he dilated and overflowed with good feeling toward the stranger, his own family and all the world. Especially did his heart swell with pride as his glance fell on Maria, who had just evinced so filial and intelligent an interest in his welfare.

"She's a good 'n," he said to the stranger, spreading his feet wide apart in the mud and jerking his head toward Maria. "She's a d—n good 'un, *I* tell ye! Look at 'er, stranger, look at that air gal—my oldes' gal. Look at 'er eyes 'n' nose 'n' han's. 'N' look at them cheeks! D'ye ever see a tomater redder or healthier? Or a piney redder 'n' healthier? Look at 'er, stranger, 'n' answer me that!"

He thrust his thumbs into the pockets of his vest, drew himself up with a swaying movement, and beamed on Maria with more than fatherly pride and affection. The stranger glanced from one to the other with the smiling curiosity of a child.

Maria did not seem to resent this public exposition of her charms.

"Dad ain't never the same two minutes afore 'n' after he's had a swoller o' whiskey," she said.

Ephraim with difficulty mounted a rounded boulder by the wayside and stood there in a sort of flaccid dignity, leering like a satyr.

"'N' she knows what's good for 'er old daddy," he proceeded with increasing rapture. "She knows when he's got 'nough on the inside o' him, every time. 'N' better 'n he knows hisself, too. Lor! *she* knows. What don't she know?" He slapped his muddy overalls with emphasis. "Sech jedgment as that gal has! Sech jedg-

ment 'n' percepshun 'n' imaginashun ! W'y she's a prodigal, stranger—that's what she is—a downright prodigal ?" (The enthusiastic father probably meant prodigy, but in his present state of exhilaration the reader will doubtless allow him a latitude of expression independent of dictionary definitions) "'N' as fer shape—man alive, jes' look at that air gal's shape ! Aint she a strapper ? Ain't she a bouncer ? Ain't she a—"

"Oh, shet up, dad !" remonstrated Maria. "Ye allus go too fur. Pick up yer hat 'n' put' it on, 'n behave yerself !"

Mr. Pugsley came down from his pedestal and obeyed all these commands—except the last—and looked more demoralized than ever under the doubtful protection of his muddy brim.

"Where d'ye git the raise o' that hat ?" cried the stranger with his keen enjoyment of everything. "Oh, I see. Ye was settin' down there makin' it out o' the mud when I come up 'n' disturbed ye !"

At this Maud Eliza collapsed, clutching wildly at her diaphragm.

Had it been possible to affix some standard of graduation to Mr. Pugsley's waistcoat, like the scale of a thermometer, to measure the influence of alcohol on sentiment, it would have been interesting to observe how the husband's opinion of his family may rise in direct proportion to his internal warmth.

"A finer fam'ly," he cried with effusion, slapping his thigh with a lively sense of domestic felicity, "can't be found nowheres, ye hear *me* ! My fam'ly—my soul swells up, stranger, whenever I think o' my fam'ly. What 'ud I do 'thout 'em ? Nothin'. Where 'd I be thout 'em ? Nowheres." He waved his hand in a confirmatory manner, slapped his thigh again, and was preparing to proceed, when Maria interrupted him.

"Ye'd git a idee 't dad was a big man, wouldn't ye,

stranger, to hear 'im talk? Well, he *is* a big man. I've often asked 'im if it don't hurt to go walkin' the earth permiscus the way he does, knockin' his head agin the stars."

But Ephraim took no notice of this sarcasm. He proceeded with an air of lofty, uncorrupted sentiment.

"That other gal in the middle there, that's Maud Elizy, my younges', 'n' the liveliest, chipperest, laffinest critter ye ever see—'s happy all day long 's a bird on the bough." Maud Eliza testified to the truthfulness of this rhapsody by a volcanic snort from the rear apartments of her nose. "It 'ud warm yer heart jes' to hear 'er laff 'n' take on. She cheers many a mournful hour with 'er sweet, chatterin' ways."

"Maud Elizy's Swipes all over, every grain o' 'er," put in Mrs. Pugsley with a touch of maternal pride.

"'N' the ole gal there," continued Ephraim, brought to a knowledge of his wife's presence by the sound of her voice, "That's Mis' Pugsley, stranger, the pardner o' my joys 'n' sorrers. (I'm Ephraim P.—'n' very happy to make yer acquaintance). She's a good 'un, too,—one 't ye don't see the like of every day o' the week, lemme tell ye; a leetle down in meat jes' now 'n' not over lively, but a woman as is wuth 'er weight in gold, 'n' is the pride o' 'er husban's heart." Ephraim wiped away a tear and Mrs. Pugsley groaned. "Ye do' know what a trouble 'tis to me 't she ain't fatter 'n what she is. I feed 'er high—it can't be that—she has things in the way o' grub 't 'ud founder a hoss—"

"I have everything I need, 'ceptin' ham sandwitchers," said Mrs. Pugsley.

"It's in 'er fam'ly," proceeded Mr. Pugsley, with affectionate feeling. "They was all thin—ye couldn't fatten 'em no more 'n ye could fatten a barb-wire fence. It wa'n't in 'em. Their nater was agin it. They was fust rate blood, the Swipses was, all o' 'em, but they wouldn't

fatten wuth a cent. That was their one fault—they wouldn't fatten wuth a d—n cent."

Mrs. Pugsley looked at the stranger with something like a rightful claim to his attention.

"The Swipeses was all fust-rate blood," she affirmed, with as much pride as if she were the descendant of kings. "They wa'n't no better nowheres. They was Southerners; they come from Arkansaw. The ole breed o' Swipeses lived there year in 'n' year out. I've heerd dad say with my own ears 't they wa'n't no better fam'ly in the state 'n his'n, nor nowheres else. They had everything they wanted in them days. That was 'fore dad come to Californy 'n' got misfortnit 'n' busted up in bizness."

"It's a game country back there, I've heerd," said the stranger, as the old woman paused to push her moist hair out of her eyes.

"I ain't 'shamed o' bein' a Swipes," she continued, speaking in a tone of formal dignity that made the stranger want to laugh. "Everybody in Stanislaus knowed Dad Swipes. He was the fust man to Swipes' Bar. He had a saloon there, 'n' he knowed how to run things. I was allus genteel in the matter o' flesh. So was dad. So was marm. So was all the Swipeses fust 'n' last—I've heerd dad say so. I ain't allus lived like this 'ere," she added, sighing. Then she settled back with the deprecation of a sensitive nature which has been forced by adversity to expand in an uncongenial medium.

"Speak to 'er, stranger," urged Mr. Pugsley, who had listened to these observations with emotion. "It's a thing ye'll be glad to 'member till yer dyin' day—the Swipeses wa'n't no slouches, I can tell ye that; 'n' they ain't 'nother sech a woman 's my Melissy under the shinin' sun." And he wiped his eye on a muddy coat-sleeve, without perceptible effect on his dubious complexion.

CHAPTER VII.

THUS adjured, the stranger approached the moist woman with hardly more awkwardness than a civilized man would have manifested at a similar demand on his social powers. Mrs. Pugsley was certainly a formidable person for a light-hearted, fun-loving young man to address at close quarters. But Maria's eyes were upon him, and a knowledge of that fact filled him with a desire to be grave and respectful—a state of mind which was a new sensation to him. He instinctively perceived that Mrs. Pugsley would construe a look of sympathetic sorrow as a compliment to her talent for wretchedness, so he lengthened his face, as if viewing a prospect of uninterrupted woe, though even then his features had an undeniable upward tendency ; then, to use his own expression, he “waded in.”

“I hope ye feel purty well, ma'am,” he said ; but observing that her appearance did not justify such a hope, and believing that she would resent the expression of it, he added : “Leastways, purty well fer a lady in yer present state o' health. I'm sure ye look very bad, ma'am. 'N' I hope ye like the weather—which mus' be tryin' to a lady o' yer dellycut constitution.” He was afraid even now of having spoken too cheerfully, and therefore changed the subject abruptly. “'N' my name 's Bling, ma'am—Billy Bling—'n' I'm a miner o' Havilah. I hope ye feel ruther better, ma'am—leastways not much worse?”

“Don’t ask me how I feel, young man!” cried the moist woman, tragically. “If ye knowed half what I suffer, it ’ud keep ye wake o’ nights!”

“Pore ole ma!” said Maria, half wistfully. “She allus talks like she feels ’s if she ’d been picked up some’r’s by accident.”

Billy secretly thought she looked so, too; but he did not venture to say it.

“I’m sure, ma’am—” he began.

“It’s nothin’ but sorer, sorer, sorer,” went on Mrs. Pugsley. “Nothin’ but sorer; fer every joy they’s a thousan’ sorners. I’m sure I allus try to be joyful ’n’ chipper ’n’ put my best foot foremost—nobody more so—’n’ even my own fam’ly ’s deceived ’n’ goes a-wonderin’ how I keep up the way I do. *They* don’t see; *they* don’t symp’thize. *They* never heerd how the moon ’s dark on t’ other side. Oh, my side—oh, my liver! I wonder if I can ever fergive God A’mighty fer lettin’ me suffer in this ’ere way. I ain’t done nothin’ to ’im. I’ve allus let ’im alone. Then what makes ’im git a holt o’ me like this? I wish ’t I’d a’ died when I could a’ had Swipes writ onto my tombstun—I do, I do!”

“I’m sure, ma’am—” Billy commenced again.

“But it can’t last long,” breathed Mrs. Pugsley, finding herself the centre of some attention, and resolving to make the most of her opportunities. “I’ll go over some day, I know I will. I’ve been dyin’ fer years, ’n’ now here ’t is. Oh, I hope it’ll be soon! I wonder what ails me ’t I can’t die?”

“Oh, la, ma,” cried Maria, encouragingly. “Don’t talk like that. Ye’re wuth twenty dead ’uns this minute. Ye won’t be ready to turn up yer toes this many a long day yit.”

Mrs. Pugsley said nothing in answer, but receded into a shower of drizzling tears, catching her breath and

groaning. After a few minutes, however, she emerged long enough to cry in solemn prophecy :

“I know they ain’t no ham-sandwichers in Havilah; I know it—I feel it in my bones !”

“Oh, yes, I bet they is,” replied Maria; and then, with a smile which caused the stranger to flush clear up to the roots of his hair and feel as if he were walking on sunbeams, “Mr. Bling ’ll hitch them dandy horses o’ his’n onto our waggin’, I’m sure, ’n’ haul us safe into Havilah, like the gentleman I know he is !”

“I’m sure ye’re very kind, Miss,” stammered Billy, redder than ever.

“Mr. Bling’s a great admirer o’ ladies, I know,” simpered Maud Eliza, wondering what kind of an impression she had made on the young man’s sensibilities.

Mr. Pugsley evinced no interest in a speedy arrival at Havilah. He was very comfortable. He had mounted his pedestal again, and seemed wrapped in the seclusion of great thoughts.

“I was jes goin’ to offer,” said Billy, recovering from his fit of blushing, and regarding Maria sidewise with shy, boyish admiration. “I’m on the way to Havilah, myself. Lucky, ain’t it?”

“Awful lucky,” assented Maria, cordially.

Billy got down from the big gray and commenced unhitching Mr. Pugsley’s jaded steeds, preparatory to putting his own in the traces. Ephraim did not offer to assist. He was too busy with the sensation of indefinite joy pervading his whole system to think of irrelevant details.

“Ye might think these ’ere horses was mine,” Billy said, busying himself about the harness, “but they ain’t. They’re Jim Hulse’s—he lives up there in the foothills beyond the camp. He’s queer, Jim is—some folks says he done a murder some’r’s back in the East, ’n’ can’t git

over it—but he ain't a bad sort o' feller, if ye take 'im right. Ye want to let 'im alone, though, when he's got a streak on—he looks 's if he'd slap ye flyin' if ye spoke to 'im then ;—one o' that sort, ye know." He looked up at Maria to see whether she was listening, and seeing that she was, flushed again and looked confused and happy.

" Oh, one o' the streaky sort," said she, caring nothing about Jim Hulse, but willing to use a little friendly deception inasmuch as Billy evidently wanted her to be interested.

" Yes, he's streaky, Jim is," continued Billy, determined to talk in spite of his embarrassment. " He reads books—he's got a hull lot o' 'em in his cabin—ye orter see 'em all in a row there over his table. They's more 'n I ever seen all told afore."

" I don't go much on books myself," declared Maria. " Eddicated folks is allus fools."

" Lor' ! " laughed Billy.

" Anyways, they've allus got their noses in the air," corrected Maria.

" Well, nose or no nose, Hulse is good friends with me, 'n' he couldn't come for the beasts hisself to-day, so I offered, bein' idle, jes' to 'commodate. He keeps 'em most o' the time up 'ere to Van Winkie's in the foothills ; I rode out with Van Winkie in the waggin' las' night. Though I'm sure I d' know what Hulse wants o' the horses. He ain't got no usefer 'em. It's a freak o' his—he's full o' freaks."

" Oh," said Maria, indifferently. She was not equal to the task of dissimulating further, even for the sake of friendship.

Billy went on with his work, still smiling. It would have given him pleasure to help the Pugsleys—he was always assisting strangers with friendly offices, just for the pleasure of doing a good turn—even if Maria had not

been one of their number ; but her presence certainly gave value to the mild satisfaction which is the usual recompense of disinterestedness. Her voice had a ring that he had never before heard in the voice of any woman ; it certified a personality which was a compound of good-fellowship and independence ; he would like to keep on doing things forever that would cause her to praise him. Innocence, we may believe, is a dream of philosophic souls ; but there was as much of that spotless quality in Billy's admiration for Maria as it is possible to conceive of in the carnal mind of man. It occupied all his energies just to think how complete she was, thus leaving no chance for baser thoughts. He wished he had seen more of women and better knew what pleased them ; he had an idea they liked lordly manners and graceful off-hand attentions, such as characterized the ephemeral flashy gamblers of the camp. He was by no means sure that Maria would be pleased by such manners, but he could not help wishing that he knew enough about them to be able to assume them at will. She was an event in his life—a suggestion of increasing enjoyment through long years to come.

Though he kept on smiling, it somehow happened that when he spoke to Maria he was inclined to maintain a respectful seriousness which was quite new to him. It was not because Maria was a serious girl—on the contrary. But in her presence he felt as if he would like to laugh at such times and in such ways as would please her. He could not make up his mind positively whether she would like laughing or anything else ; he could hardly imagine her likes and dislikes, even in outline. And indeed Maria would have puzzled a riper student of human nature than Billy Bling. She was as ambiguous as an unfinished sentence ; she suggested a multitude of meanings and confirmed so few of them.

CHAPTER VIII.

EPHRAIM's horses were presently removed and tied to the rear of the wagon, where Maud Eliza amused herself by flicking their noses with her apron and snickering. After letting out several straps in the old harness, the big grays were fastened in the traces, and everything was ready to start. Then Mr. Pugsley descended serenely from his pedestal, mounted the front seat beside Billy, and in a moment the wagon was under way.

"Now, that's suthin' like," declared Maria, approvingly.

"I'm glad ye like it, Miss," replied Billy with a pleased look.

"Ain't this suthin' like?" asked Maria, turning to her mother.

But the moist woman evidently considered that such an admission would be derogatory to her dignity as professional mourner, and only answered with a groan. Billy noted the kindly tone in which Maria spoke to her mother and made up his mind that, whatever her likes and dislikes might be, any little attention he might pay to the old lady would not be unacceptable to the young one. He was at a loss how to take advantage of this new knowledge—sympathy seemed to make the old lady worse and hopefulness she resented. He determined, however, to assist her out of the wagon when they reached Havilah—Maria would be sure to notice an attention like that. Women in Havilah usually scrambled out of wagons as best they could, but the laws of custom were not inviolable. He contented himself with thinking how glad he

was of the opportunity to do something for Maria and her family. If it were not for him, they might be sitting there in the wagon yet, longing for some one to come to their assistance. No lover who sees his mistress wearing a gift of his conspicuously in a ball-room could feel more hopeful than did Billy at the assurance that Maria accepted his services with gratitude. But fear is always the parallel of hope, and while he could not help believing Providence, who had kindly seconded matters thus far, would, for shame of inconsistency, continue propitious, he dreaded the impression he might be making on this strong-minded young woman. Well, no matter ; there was plenty of time. Meanwhile, there was the old woman to experiment on. She was what Billy called a "sure thing."

"How pretty the sun looks on the river !" said Maria, after a long pause.

"Don't it, though !" cried Billy with delight. His long and intimate intercourse with nature had furnished his mind with some bold comparisons, and he did not feel afraid to express them to Maria. "D'ye know, it allus makes me think 't the sun 's busted 'n' tumbled into the water."

Maria laughed.

"Lor, what a idee ?" she said. Then, after a moment's silence, "It ain't bad, though. Most men don 't think 'o' sech things."

Billy answered her with a grateful look which she did not see. He thought it was something to the purpose that she noticed a favorable difference between him and other men.

"I used to think a heap more 'bout such things when I was a kid," he said. "I can 'member mother used to tell suthin' from the Bible 'bout how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet o' him that brings glad tidin's ; 'n' after I come out 'ere from Ohio—that's where I was borned

'n' raised—it come to me all of a heap 't the big white clouds was like that on the mountains—like Christ come to make the world glad.” He spoke very seriously, even while his lips were still smiling ; but all at once his tone changed as if he was fearful of a too solemn turn in the conversation. “ They ain't no 'countin' fer what 'll come into a feller's head at odd times—'specially when ye're a kid. Sometimes I 'most wish 't I was a baby agin—it's sech fun to grow up ! Don't *you* ? ”

“ No, thankee,” returned Maria with decision. “ I've had my share o' growin' up. I'll take the rest o' mine in stayin' big. I'm purty well contented the way I be.”

“ It's a fine team, that air,” remarked Mr. Pugsley, who was in a mood to praise everything.

“ Jim Hulse wouldn't keep no other kind,” was the answer. “ He knows a good piece o' hoss flesh when he sees it, Jim does.”

“ Oh, a judge o' hoss flesh, eh ? ” said Mr. Pugsley. “ Well, well ! that's good—I like a man 't knows a dandy from a scrub ; 'n' I've allus said I know a fine wooman when I see 'er ; she sort o' fixes 'erself in my eye 'n' stays there. Now, that Mariar o' mine—” Mr. Pugsley lowered his voice and glanced behind him furtively, “ w'y, that gal, stranger, that gal 'll make some man sech a wife 's 'ud be the envy o' a 'Frisco stockbroker, she will, by hokey ! I've studied 'er like a father, 'n' I know.”

Billy looked impressed, not amused, as he would have done had Ephraim spoken thus of Maud Eliza.

“ She *is* a fine woman,” he said meditatively, as if dwelling on a blissful idea.

“ Be ye a married man ? ” continued Ephraim with unsophisticated directness.

“ No.”

Billy glanced back at Maria. She sat with her hands loosely folded in her lap, and she was laughing. Evi-

dently she had heard every word. Billy laughed too, though sheepishly.

"Dad's awful interestin', ain't he, when he gits a little full 'n' commences blowin'?" she said, as his eye met hers.

Billy flushed, not knowing what to answer. But his embarrassment left him like the passing away of an opaque obstruction as he discovered in her words an opportunity to give her a compliment. He looked into her eyes with his old unconstrained laugh.

"Not half 's interestin' 's what *you* be," he replied, gallantly.

"Oh, now, you!" cried Maria, in smiling reproach.

Maud Eliza, whose curiosity had gradually overcome her jealousy of her sister, had been holding her breath for fear of losing a word of this novel conversation. All at once she gave a tempestuous snort and hid her head in her apron.

Billy did not notice. He was too busy with his compliment.

"Oh, I ain't foolin'," he declared. "Ye *be* interestin'." He was determined to be understood, but Maria only shook her head in incredulous protest.

Here Mr. Pugsley broke into the conversation by nudging his new acquaintance in the ribs with an air of secrecy.

"Gimme 'nother drop o' bug-juice, stranger," he said, in a whisper.

"Don't ye do it," called out Maria, who seemed to hear everything. "He's had all he needs for the present, 'n' he sha'n't have no more. The wind's in that direction, 'n' every time he opens his mouth now it's like somebody opened a bar'l o' whiskey; 'n' that's 'nough fer any man."

Mr. Pugsley subsided with childlike obedience.

"That gal knows what's good fer me," he said. "She's a gal o' sperrit 'n' imaginashun. Whenever I go to do anything out o' the way ye'll hear 'er commence to roar like a dose o' quinine. *She* knows. She's got a conscience 't's allus on the rampage, Mariar has."

Suddenly he nudged Billy once more.

"Say, be ye purty well off?" he asked.

"Not p'tickler," was the answer.

"Oh!" murmured Ephraim in a tone of waning enthusiasm.

"I've got prospecks o' a purty good thing, though—the best prospecks 't's been seen in Havilah sence the ole boom."

"I don't go much on prospecks," declared Mr. Pugsley. "I've had 'em myself more 'n wunst—I've allus been havin' 'em ever sence I can 'member—'n' they never was no good. What I want is facks. Facks is the only thing 't counts."

He meditated a little while.

"Ye make 'nough 'ere in the mines to s'port a wife 'n' fam'ly, I reckon?" he questioned.

"Oh, yes, more 'n' 'nough fer that."

Billy saw plainly the drift of the old man's remarks, and for some reason felt inclined to encourage him.

Mr. Pugsley settled back with an exhalation of relief.

"O' course," he said, suddenly sitting up again and bringing his mouth close to Billy's ear, "if ye was to git married ye wouldn't have no fam'ly o' yer own at fust—that's plain; so 't ye could 'ford to keep yer wife's fam'ly, jes' to ekalize things?"

Billy was serious enough as he answered:

"If I thought 'nough o' a gal to marry 'er, I'd be willin' to do all I could fer 'er folks. I'd consider 'em a part o' 'er."

Mr. Pugsley beamed.

"Ye're the very man I've been lookin' fer," he whispered, in a voice choked with emotion. "'Tain't every feller 't I'd trust a daughter o' mine to—'tain't every feller 't I'd give 'er up to jes' fer the askin' in this way. But *you*—God bless ye, my dear young friend, go in 'n' win 'er 'n' be happy!" And Ephraim settled back rapturously, as if he had beheld an earthward flight of heavenly things.

This paternal disposal of his future did not seem disagreeable to Billy. But what if Maria had heard this whispered conversation, as she had heard those that preceded it? How would she take it? He blushed consciously and cast a hasty look back at her. Her dark eyes met his quizzically, and she laid the fore-finger of her left hand delicately beside her nose.

"Lemme give ye a word o' advice, young feller," she said, with careful explicitness, taking her finger away and waving her hand airily. "I don't want t' introod on yer private bizness, 'n' I don't want to force myself into the confidence o' nobody; but this I'll say: When ye marry, be sure ye git the gal 'n' not 'er boozy ole daddy!"

The young man smiled doubtfully and turned very red. Ephraim did not seem to care much that he had been overheard; but he said nothing further, being so content with his own internal warmth that any change, even the slight one which speech necessitated, seemed a useless departure from what was thoroughly agreeable. Billy examined the flanks of the horses with a studious air. Maria evidently intended her speech as a rebuff—one would think that she was not fond of lovers. But he was not going to be discouraged by such a trifle as that. If he failed, he would fail trying. That was a good motto in courtship as well as in business affairs. "Fail, trying." He would remember that when she discouraged

him—which he imagined would be often. It would keep his hopes from running too high, also, for it implied a potential failure. But the more difficult her love was to win, the more valuable the possession of it would be. He would remember that in the midst of all sorts of discouragements.

The big horses pulled steadily through the thickening mud, their grand muscles swelling with the occasional increased strain brought to bear upon them. A cynic would have been led to compare the motives of these patient, conscientious beasts with the motives of the load of poor humanity which they dragged—would have concluded that if, instead of man, some animals had been endowed with dominion over all created things, creation might have been the gainer ; but no such propagator of unscriptural views was present, and the only voice lifted up in protest was Mrs. Pugsley's wail of impersonal reproach whenever the wagon dove downward with unusual violence.

Billy would like to have kept on saying things expressive of his admiration for Maria, but he felt afraid ; and the right words would not come. What man has ever found fitting words with which to address the loveliest woman he has ever seen ? The spirit is lost in the letter, the rush of feeling is dissipated in the effort intended to strengthen it. It was enough, after all, just to sit still and think of her—words would come later. He was glad—selfishly glad—that he was the first man in Havilah to meet her, for this gave him an advantage over all subsequent acquaintances. That she would be at once beset by all manner of admirers, he did not for a moment doubt. She threw far into the shade all women who had been in that part of the country within his recollection. Only a short time ago a snub-nosed, freckled girl from Petered-Out—a camp on the farther side of the mountains

—had made a triumphal entry into Havilah and carried off a successful young miner—the biggest catch in camp—in less than a week after her arrival. After such evidence of the susceptibility of the male portion of the community, what quantities of admiration might be expected to fall to the share of a girl like Maria. Billy was not a conceited man, but he had reason to believe that he could hold his own, as far as looks went, with the best of them in camp; and in spite of Maria's half-serious discouragement of his lover-like advances, his hopeful, happy temperament could not help picturing agreeable possibilities. He felt at the beginning of a happy change. His future seemed close beside him; he stepped into its clear, shallow current as blithely as a young child steps into a running brook. He was still young—only twenty-six—and in spite of his semi-barbarous life, the eager hopes of youth and early manhood yet lay upon him, as wholesome and refreshing as the raindrops of a summer shower.

After a while he turned and looked at Ephraim somewhat shamefacedly, as if conscious of a selfish intent.

“Well, ole feller,” he asked, “have ye got a cabin spoke fer to live in after ye git to Havilah?”

“Well, no—I ain't. We ain't used to houses, nohow. We'll camp in the waggin; mebbe we'll run acrosst a shanty o' some sort after a while, but we're used to the waggin.”

“I wouldn't do that!” cried Billy eagerly. “I've got a cabin there by the river, 't ain't been used fer more 'n a year. I stay up in the hills mostly, now. Ye can move yer traps in there if ye like. It's a heap better 'n the waggin. They's a stove 'n' a table 'n' what not—a lot o' things I didn't need up in the hills. They's three rooms, too, 'n' two o' 'em's got beds what I bought cheap wunst to a auction. Ye'd better make up yer mind to stopt here.”

Mr. Pugsley leaned over and laid his hand affectionately around Billy's shoulders, bringing his ill-favored visage close to the young man's ear.

"That suits me half to death!" he cried with enthusiasm. "Ye'll make some fine man a fine son-in-law one o' these fine days!"

So it was settled, and Billy felt as if a new epoch had begun in the history of the world—an event had occurred from which time should be computed. The current of his life had changed, had touched the current of Maria's life, might flow on beside it or mingle with it, but never return to its former channel. He felt very happy in that thought—he could never again be as he had been. He would have something to work for, something to care for. Love is the creative spirit of these days, as of yore. It forms a man from the dust of the earth, breathes into him the divine breath and makes of him a living soul. Billy gazed about him with something like a convalescent's enjoyment of old things rejuvenated; he saw everything in a new glory; the mountains, the sky, the river were all sharers in his young hopes. How pleasant the world seemed—how clear and pure! The wagon was close to the foothills now, and high over his head the wind struck an Æolian melody from the pines. Even the dead cedars were beautiful, flinging their interlaced shadows like tangled spiders' webs across the yellow rocks. Accustomed to the sympathetic look and speech of Nature, Billy interpreted the lights and shadows into happy meanings. The sunlight sifted through the dark pine branches, making a pale blue vapor underneath. His future was like that—dim and uncertain, indeed, but with hope streaming brightly across the unknown paths.

CHAPTER IX.

THE Pugsley cavalcade, with Maud Eliza snorting with undiminished violence in the rear, arrived at the camp of Havilah a little after noon.

Ephraim beamed on the hospitable signboards with benevolent cordiality, and Mrs. Pugsley evinced signs of interest by drawing up her knees under the blankets and giving desultory galvanic jerks with her head in the endeavor to obtain an inclusive view of her surroundings.

"Well, here we air, ma," remarked Maria, noticing the moist woman's growing interest, and sharing in it with rough sympathy. "This is better 'n bein' stuck in the mud out there on the prairie now, ain't it? Ye mus' own up 't this is better."

"I ain't a-denyin' 't it's better. Who said I was? If I have my own idees 'bout things, I reckon I can keep 'em to myself if I want to. But that was allus yer way—ye want me to keep a howlin' 'n' a lettin' my idees out into the world in a constant stream. 'N' a woman 's better off as keeps 'er troubles to 'erself. 'Tain't no way to keep a-yawpin'. Ye'll find that out fer yerself when ye git a man o' yer own."

The wagon lunged through the street in an uncertain, spasmodic way, like an old man in a hurry. Maria bore the inspection of the idlers about the saloons with the composed impudence which prides itself on never being stared out of countenance, and Maud Eliza tittered with a delighted sense of being the cynosure of many masculine eyes. The idlers in front of the saloons pointed with dirty index fingers at the occupants of the wagon, and an occasional

remark was audible, expressing a judicial discrimination as to the merits of the respective "shapes" of the Pugsley sisters. Billy was greeted with several cordial "Hello's!" and always returned the salutation with the utmost friendliness.

Before one of the shabbiest of the saloons stood a man and a woman, evidently the proprietors of the place, who at once fastened Maria's attention.

"Did ye ever see anything 't was opened up eal to the mouths o' 'em?" she asked of Billy. "If I was them, I'd be afeerd o' the sun shinin, clean into my stummick 'n' settin' my dinner on fire."

And Billy laughed, thinking that Maria was the wittiest girl he had ever met.

The man in front of the saloon was very tall and had a small head set directly on an immense abdomen, like a wart on an apple; and to add to the incongruity of his appearance, his legs were surprisingly long and frail. Maria regarded him with ill-concealed amusement. "He looks like a punkin on stilts," she whispered to Maud Eliza, who clutched her side in an agony of giggles.

The woman was like the fat lady of a side-show—like an inverted balloon—like a haystack—like something suggestive of the ultimate exhaustion of material. Her gown was of faded pink calico, split here and there along the seams and fitting tightly across her broad hips; there was a frayed flounce around the bottom, headed with the inevitable "bias" which finishes off the feminine costume of California mining camps. Her wiry yellow-locks, bleached to a dingy white at the ends, suggested a long interregnum of anarchy between the present hour and the last application of a comb. While regarding the Pugsleys with an almost personal interest, she tossed a heavy-looking baby from one arm to the other, chucking it absently under the chin and making it squall wrathfully while

intending to soothe and amuse it. Her divided attention left her at liberty to poke her fingers into the baby's eye while seeking its chin, and these aimless explorations resulted in wild, ineffectual yells of protest from her victim.

Maria could not resist the temptation to have some fun at the fat woman's expense. She had made sport of strangers frequently, when their peculiarities happened to amuse her. In a question of manners she was altogether without judgment; she did what pleased her, regardless of justice. Probably a large freedom of manners was a part of the joy of the Hyperboreans; I can imagine Maria fitting into their savage conditions and enjoying to the full the measure of their irresponsible pleasures.

With a sudden impulse of deviltry she thrust her head forward, squinted her eyes, and opened her mouth to its utmost extent in exaggerated imitation of the fat woman's look; then she spread her fingers as far apart as possible and held her extended palms on either side of her face as if to indicate that a very great expansion of herself was the only thing needed to complete the resemblance. After holding herself in this attitude for a moment, she let her hands fall again into her lap, flung back her head and burst into abnormal laughter.

The fat woman seemed to be of a caloric temperament, for at sight of this mirth she deposited the choking baby on a beer barrel with more emphasis than tenderness and squared herself toward the Pugsleys, her feet spread wide and her arms akimbo. Shaking back her variegated locks and breathing very hard, she shouted at Maria in a hoarse guttural voice:

"Well, gawp, ye imperdent hussey, why don't ye? Gawp, do! Prob'ly ye'll know a lady the nex' time ye git fur 'nough from home to see one. Why don't ye gawp, ye cat? 'N' giggle, do! ye think ye're some, don't ye, a-settin' up there with yer bold face 'n' eyes a-starin' 'n'

snickerin' at decent folks as could buy 'n' sell ye every hour o' the day 'n' tween times if they wan't afeered o' a bad bargain on their hands. Oh, gawp ! we ain't hansim nor stylish nor grinnin' from ear to ear like some folks, but we're jes' 's good's anybody a-goin' in this ere world. 'N' ye hear *me*," she added, as if to hear was to be convinced.

Maria's training had crystallized into two or three well-defined principles of action, one of which was, in western phrase, " never to take no sass off'm nobody ; " her temper was always waiting, like a soldier, the command which might lead to conquest. The wagon was almost out of hearing by this time, but she thrust her head out through the tattered canvas and screamed at the top of her voice :

" Sass is becomin' to ye, ole woman—keep it up—its yer stronghold ! ye couldn't look purtier nohow—not if ye was sayin' yer prayers ! "

And she laughed as insultingly as she knew how.

The woman seized her petticoats in one hand, extended the other to balance herself and started toward the road as if to force Maria to a fist-fight then and there ; but, finding the mud too deep for one of her weight, she paused by the side of the road and commenced swearing.

" I'll pay ye fer usin' yer lip on *me* ! " she screeched in a phrenzy of helpless rage. " Oh, wait ! I 'll fix ye when I lay hands on ye !—may the devil pitchfork the heart o' ye ! Won't I smash ye so' t ye won't know yerself fer a month ? Won't I—"

The words were inaudible by this time, but Maria increased the fat woman's wrath by pointing a derisive finger and then grasping her side as if the sight was really too comical to be borne. The fat woman still stood beside the road, and at sight of Maria's continued mirth she again seized her skirts and tried to get forward. But again the mud was too much for her. She plunged wildly about

for a moment, balancing herself with her disengaged hand, but presently was forced to return to dry ground where she turned and shook her immense fist after the retreating wagon. Then, after stamping about on the steps a short time, she seized her squalling baby from the beer-barrel and dashed headlong into the saloon.

"She'll take it out on the baby," said Billy, half in pity.

"Well, let'er!" cried Maria. "She needn't think she's goin' to take it out on *me*! *I* ain't a sand bag fer nobody."

"Well," said Billy, "I don't guess ye air. 'N' seems like ole Sammy's fin'ly found somebody 't ain't afeerd o' 'er!"

"Sammy? Lor', what a name for a wooman!"

"Fits 'er purty well, though, don't it? Her reel name 's Samanthy, but everybody calls 'er Sammy fer short. She's a bad 'un—a reg'lar terror. W'y I've heerd 'er own husban' say 't they's fire 'n brimstun 'nough in that wooman to burn up a turnpike road. Everybody's afeerd o' 'er."

Maria sniffed contemptuously.

"Well, *I* ain't," she said.

"Maria don't keer fer nothin'," put in Ephraim proudly. "The devil ain't a patchin' to my gal Mariar!"

"I thought she was goin' to waltz right out through the mud 'n' yank ye out o' the waggin," said Billy. "She'd a done it if the mud hadn't been so deep."

"*Would* she? I'd like to ketch 'er at it," said Maria with decision.

"She's got a awful temper."

"So 've I."

"But she's the biggest," said Billy, amused and admiring. He liked a woman of spirit—one who could take care of herself and enjoy the occupation.

"I don't keer how big she is," declared Maria. "I ain' a-goin' to set down 'n' be run over by nobody. I ain't a-goin' to have no ole Sammy nor nobody else jumpin' onto me with both feet 'n' say nothin' back. I guess I've got a right to grin. She'd make a fun'ral grin, that critter would."

"Ye jumped onto 'er fust," said Maud Eliza, with unexpected acuteness.

"Mariar's allus joslin'," declared Ephraim with his hoarse chuckle. "I seen 'er makin' faces at the ole critter at the very start. She a'n't afeered o' God A'mighty, Mariar ain't."

"She'll git it tuck out o' 'er when she gits married, though," said Mrs. Pugsley in the tone of a priestess who delivers oracular responses.

"Well, I like grit in a wooman," said Billy, with his light laugh. "The wimmin need it's much 's the men does in this country."

"I *hate* wimmin 't set aroun' 's harmless's picters," declared Maria. "What's the use o' a life like that? Better be dead to wunst 'n' done with it. I believe in lettin' folks know I'm aroun'. It's the least a gal can do."

"I'm afreed yer ort'n't to a-done it, though," said Ephraim with the mild reproof occasioned by judicious afterthought. "I don't think ye order—reely."

"Oh, it'ud a-been all right with *you* if they didn't keep a saloon," retorted Maria. "Ye're afeerd they won't want ye loafin' aroun' there now—that's all 't ails *you*."

And Ephraim did not deny the charge.

CHAPTER X.

THE cabin which Billy Bling placed at the disposal of the Pugsleys was a three-roomed wooden structure, with a shaky roof and a veranda. The veranda faced the cottonwoods and the river, and commanded a comprehensive view of the far-off mountains; and at the back of the house the ground sloped rapidly up to the foot-hills. The house was unpainted, the chimney had crumbled, and some of the windows were broken, the roof was warped, too, and several clapboards were loose, one above the doorway, especially, was hanging in a helpless way, as if wondering at its unaccountable detention in mid-air. The building looked as if a sharp wind would cut through it, and as if a storm would demolish it. Happily, storms and sharp winds were rare in this part of the world, so that the house formed a convenient, if not ornamental, shelter. The veranda had a hospitable look, and the yard was even pretentious in its magnitude, though the fence was almost obliterated in places. The small, blurred windows held a look of philosophic discernment which made one feel, before entering, as if he were about to penetrate the recesses of an experienced old man's brains. Old houses almost always have this look of mystery; it is a part of their individuality.

Maria liked it at once. It was more homelike than anything she had known since her father kept a gin-shop in Nevada City, when she was a little child. She experienced a sudden modification of her conceptions of Havilah. All the houses were not saloons—here was an agreeable

proof of that fact. Here was a place where she could go in and out as she chose ; a door to open and shut, and windows to look out of whenever she liked, herself screened from the passer-by. She commenced to wonder why she had never missed this privacy which all at once seemed so pleasant ; she had never thought of its advantages at all while obliged to put up with the wagon-cover as her only screen from strangers' eyes, but had rather regarded houses as an affectation of weak-minded people. But, with a house of her own, this idea changed suddenly. The sense of possession filled her with keen enjoyment. The rose-vines, torn loose from their leather fastenings, swayed helplessly about the veranda, but she touched their leafless branches tenderly as she passed up the steps, no longer doubting that she liked flowers, now that there was a prospect of having some of her own. She mentally resolved that she would nail the vines back to their support without delay, and prepare them for such a season of blossoming as they had never known before. They were mute prophecies of bright colors and sweet scents which would be all her own ; and she knew that the big drowsy bees would hover about the place a little later, filling the air with a noise that would shame the shrunk river. And the river was very near—she could see it through the leafless cottonwoods, whirling past like a river of clouds ; the roar of it came to her ears like the roar of a cannonade. The foothills were but a little way off, too, with their shadowy recesses and venerable pines. Maria did not usually look at the mountains with much attention ; she was used to the changing aspect of rocks and trees, and found little or no enjoyment in contemplating them ; there was no movement in them, no soul ; they were as stale as imaginations grown familiar by repetition. But to-day the foothills appeared to her in a new light ; they belonged to the surroundings of her home.

The rounded summits of red sandstone looked as softly flushed as apples that bask in the October sun. The delicate façades that diversified the rocky walls—a traveller would have discovered in their faint tracery a resemblance to the rock-carved ruins of some Eastern necropolis—for the first time appeared to her worthy of notice. She would see those ridges and chasms every day—they would be a part of her external life. But the river, the river! She turned to look at it again; she was glad beyond measure to have it so near her. She always thought of running water as a living thing with a human voice and human affections, and there had been times as she sat listening to it when she could almost imagine herself into its experience as it passed outward and onward all the way from the mountains to the sea. The full-fed cattle lying at ease on the shady bank may do as much, quite dulled to all consciousness but that of wide-reaching enjoyment.

Billy waited by the wagon and helped Mrs. Pugsley to alight, well knowing that Maria was looking on and would be pleased with any little attention of that sort to her mother; a simple act of kindness, but which he was far-seeing enough to believe would form a link in a chain of possible causes. Mrs. Pugsley dropped one shoe at the gate, and came the rest of the way up the path carrying it in her hand, an unmistakable symbol of disintegration; altogether presenting a companion picture to Abaris traversing Greece with an arrow in his hand as a symbol of Apollo.

Billy unlocked the rickety door and stood on the threshold smiling, waiting for Maria to enter first. She gave her hand to her mother, who was climbing the steps with some difficulty; then she turned to him with a glad smile.

“I like it a’ready,” she said, looking into his eyes with

frank happiness. "Ye're very good to us. It's better 'n what I'm used to."

Only a student of the embryology of love could explain why Billy turned so red at these words of commendation, and why he kept his face shyly turned away, as if fearing that she might read the new hope in his eyes. He was sure he wanted her to know his real feeling, above all things; but it made him quiver all over with helplessness and happiness and silliness whenever he thought of her becoming aware of it.

They went into the house. In a moment Billy was out to the wagon again, and in another moment he was back with an armful of blankets which he deposited in a corner of the room, and Mrs. Pugsley immediately settled down upon them like one who has attained an ambition, remarking that this was "suthin' like bein' a Swipes." She had a stranded look in such dry surroundings. Maria regarded everything with the cheerfulness born of favorable contrast. She felt as proud and happy as if a royal demesne had suddenly fallen to her by inheritance; and indeed such a habitation is by no means to be despised in a land where circumstance, the crude lexicographer, makes utility synonymous with luxury.

"'Tain't nothin' extry," said Billy, apologetically, "But I reckon it'll be more comf'table 'n the waggin. They's a lot o' truck aroun' 't I've kep' handy to cook with when I happened to want to stop here over night, or sech a matter; 'n' they's wood in the woodshed yit, if I 'member right."

Maria opened the woodshed door in order to satisfy herself with her own eyes.

"Yes," she cried, "they *is* wood there, a lot o' it, 'n' all split, too! W'y, they's everything! 'N' here's a shovel to take up the ashes with—ma, did ye ever see the beat? 'N' a saw-hoss 'n' a axe, 'n'—'n' everything! Lor'! won't

we have a kick-up here all by ourselves ! W'y it's royal, that's what 'tis—a elegant sufficiency o' everything ? I'd ruther be here 'n with the angel Gabriel this minute ! ” And she commenced opening the stove-doors one after another.

“ I'm glad ye like it,” Billy ventured to say.

“ Yes, we like it,” said Mrs. Pugsley with condescension. “ It's what we was used to afore misfortshun overtook us. We wa'n't allus common scrubs like what ye see now.”

“ I'm sure nobody'd take ye fer common scrubs,” returned Billy. “ *I* wouldn't, least o' all.”

The moist woman drew a blanket around her, in a royal, all-presupposing manner, and then sank back as if to a slow and poisonous decay. “ *This* is suthin' like bein' a Swipes,” she remarked again, and she closed her eyes.

“ Dad,” said Maria with an air of bland authority, “ ye mus' go right out now 'n' git a chunk o' bacon somers 'n' lemme try this 'ere stove. Lor', I ain't had holt o' a stove afore fer a age 'n' a half. I wonder if I'll know how to act with it. Is this 'ere jigger in the pipe a damper ? 'N' how does it go ? Oh, yes, I see now. Run, dad, 'n' git the bacon. I'm jes' cavin' in with hunger, 'n' the sight o' a stove puts me clean on the rampage. Ye've got six bits left, hain't ye ? That'll buy 'nough fer two or three days. We've got some coffee yit—run out to the wagin 'n' git it, Maud Eliza—run ! ”

Maud Eliza tittered and skipped wildy out of the room and down the path, kicking up her skirts very high behind.

“ We'd better set the fire a-goin the fust thing, I reckon,” said Billy, “ 'n' then I'll go after the grub. I know where to git it, 'n' yer dad might have to hunt fer the place ! ”

“ He'd find it soon 'nough if they kep' it at the saloons,” said Maria. “ But do jes' 's ye like. I'll go split some

kindlin' while ye're away 'n' set the fire a-goin. Lor', what times !”

She went out into the woodshed, and, instead of starting at once for the victuals, Billy followed her as devoutly as a young enthusiast follows a heavenly vision. When he reached the doorway she already had a stick in position and was raising the axe for a blow.

“Wait—wait !” he called to her, eagerly.

She stopped and looked at him smilingly, with the axe poised in mid-air.

“Wait?” she called out to him interrogatively. “What fer ?”

“Why, *I* want to split the kindlin’ !”

“What fer ?” she repeated, still smiling and with the axe still poised. He thought he had never seen anything so beautiful as she was just then, with her strong, firm figure thrown into that alert attitude and her muscular arms holding the axe as if it were no more than a feather’s weight. Her lips were parted, so that her white teeth shone through, and her eyes were shining like precious stones.

As he did not answer, she lowered the axe so that the iron head rested upon the foot with which she was holding the stick in place on the ground ; then she crossed her hands on the top of the helve, still looking at him. When she spoke again the laughter had died out of her face somewhat.

“What d’ ye want to split the kindlin’ fer ?” she asked again.

She seemed so self-controlled, so sure of herself and her future, so capable of turning all things into whatsoever direction she would, while he was certain only that he loved her and longed to serve her.

“W’y,” he began stammeringly, “I reckon ’t bein’ a man it ’ud be properer fer me to do it.”

She laughed and let the axe fall from her hands to the ground.

"I'm sech a dellycut thing, ain't I," she cried, moving back against the wall and standing with her arms akimbo. "Well, ye can split the kindlin' if ye like 'n' I'll stan' 'ere 'n' look on 'n' play the lady."

Billy came forward and picked up the axe. It was probably his bending posture that caused him to flush so hotly, as he said :

"Bein' a lady ain't no play with *you*, I'll go bail. If they ever was a lady anywheres, it's you, 'n' so I tell ye, right now !"

Maria laughed.

"Oh, I mean it," declared Billy, giving the stick of kindling a random blow that caused the dry dirt to fly in all directions and rattle against the walls, "I mean it, every word ; 'n' I'd like to ketch the feller 't dares deny it !"

"It wouldn't be no great ketch, I reckon," declared Maria. "Lor, there's Maud Elizy with the coffee," she added as that hilarious damsel made her appearance, tittering, in the woodshed door. "Did ye have to hunt all over the waggin afore ye found it? 'n' how much is they o' it? 'Nough fer two-three drawin's yit, ain't they !" She reached out her hand for the package, opened it and looked in. "Oh, yes, they'll be 'nough to last till day after to-morrer if we're savin' ; 'n' mebbe dad 'll get work by that time, so 't we needn't scrimp no more."

"Ye never'd guess where I found it," said Maud Eliza, snorting at some comical recollection which went through and through her and doubled her up into her apron.

"Well, where?" asked Maria, willing to be amused.

"Guess !" cried the giggler, grasping her side and keeping her head concealed in her apron.

"No, I never could guess nothin'. Mebbe Mr. Bling 'll try."

"I never could guess nothin', nother," declared Billy, pausing in his task very willingly to declare his similarity to Maria even in the insignificant particular of guessing. "I never could guess the fust blame thing!"

The giggler withdrew her head from her apron and kicked one foot playfully toward the young man over the threshold while she still clutched her apron in both hands.

"Well, I'll tell ye, then," she snickered. "It was wrapped up in one o' my ole shoes!" With that she "let go" of herself somewhere with a violence that sent her spinning into the front room where she tumbled upon an empty candle-box under the window in a spasm of fearful snorts.

Maria smiled a little, too.

"'Twon't hurt the coffe none," she said, philosophically. "They was a paper 'round it. Lor! ye've got 'nough kindlin' wood to last a plump week. Now, let's see what the stove's like. D'ye reckon it 'll draw? We used to have a stove to Navady City 't smoked us to herrin' s every time we cooked on it. I hope this 'un ain't like that.

"No, I 'm sure this 'un ain't like that," said Billy, gathering up an armful of kindling and following her into the front room. "They ain't been no fire in it fer some time now, but I reckon it 'll go."

Maria knelt down by the hearth and he deposited the kindling in a heap at her side. She took up two or three sticks in a thoughtful way and turned them over and over in her hands.

"I 'm 'feard they won't light 'less they been whittled a little," she said. "Gimme yer knife a minute, will ye? D' ye ever see a wooman whittle?"

"D' know 's I did," he answered, drawing out his knife and unclasping it, "'n I d' know's I want to. I 'll whittle the kindlin's. That's man's work, too."

"Oh, pshaw!" said Maria. "I reckon wimmin's good fer suthin!"

“Oh, yes wimmin’s good fer suthin,” assented Billy, cheerfully. And then with a rush, “I wouldn’t object if ye said one o’ ’em was good fer everything !

Maria took the whittled sticks from him as fast as they were ready and laid them in a loose pile inside the stove. Once she looked up at him with sudden gratitude and said impulsively :

“Ye ’re very good to us—all o’ us. I hope ye won’t never regret it—d’ye reckon ye will ?” He looked at her with a stress of emotion which made him afraid to speak—with a magnetic tingling of nerve that came of a heightened sense of comprehension and sympathy. He wished he dared touch her—dared tell her all that was in his heart, then and there. But that was impossible. Mrs. Pugsley and Maud Eliza were both in the room, the former oblivious to everything, even the slow process by which she seemed changing into an unwholesome vapor. He glanced around to see what Maud Eliza was doing. She was sitting on the candle-box by the window, her back toward him, and she seemed to be picking holes in the window-ledge with the point of a pin. Just then Maria scratched a match under his nose and leaned forward to apply it to the shavings ; for a moment their faces were close together and when she lifted her head a stray lock of hair brushed his cheek. Her face was in the opposite direction and before he knew what he had done, he had turned and kissed that fluttering tress of hair ! And she did not know—how could she ! He was ashamed of himself a moment later for taking advantage of her so, but for his life he could not have helped it. No man is always master of himself in the presence of the woman he loves, and Billy’s soul had obeyed that sudden impulse of tenderness as promptly as his muscles ordinarily obeyed his will. When Maria turned from the stove again she wondered why Billy was blow-

ing so hard at the blaze which was leaping up brightly as if disclaiming the need of his eager assistance.

As soon as Billy dared look up he glanced back once more at Maud Eliza to see if she had noticed anything ; but she was still sitting with her back toward him, picking some sort of pattern in the window-ledge with the point of her pin. He heaved a sigh of relief. He felt guilty enough to endure any sort of punishment—that is any sort of punishment short of Maria's anger at his audacity—but he was glad that no one suspected him and that there was no prospect of his getting his just deserts.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN the fire was well started Maria rose from her knees, as impatient of the delay before getting dinner as a fashionable woman who is obliged to postpone a shopping expedition for a quarter of an hour.

"It seems a thousan' years till I can git to cookin' on that air stove," she said, regarding that article of furniture with affectionate ownership. "I'd ruther have it 'n' a cart load o' that jewl'ry like what the women in 'Frisco load theirselves down with. It makes a body feel sort o' lifted up 'n' airy to git a house 'n' furniter 'n' all this truck to wunst. I feel like I was bein' fooled, somehow, 'n' 't can't be true."

"Well, I'll strike out fer the grub now," said Billy, making for the door. "I reckon ye all feel ruther holler after the trip ye've had 'n' can git aroun' a reasonable pile. Mind," he added, turning on the threshold and laughing back at Maria, "'n' don't wake up 'fore I come back, fer that 'ud prove it's all a dream!"

"No fear but what I'll stay asleep 's long 's I can if this is dreamin'," answered Maria. "I ain't the one to let a soft snap go afore I have to, ye can bet on that!"

Half-way down the path he called back again:

"Tell yer ma," he said, "'t I'm a-goin' to git 'er the best lot o' ham sandwitchers in Havilah, with a layer o' ham 'n' mustard into 'em 's thick 's 'er foot!" And then, seeing the look of approval on Maria's face, he shut the gate with an inconsequent bang and in a moment was out of sight.

"He's a reel nice feller, anyhow," said Maria, turning

back into the room. "A reel nice feller. Id' know 's I ever seen one afore where the goodness seemed to go clean through 'n' through 'n' stick out the way it does with him."

And Ephraim, freed from the responsibility of provisioning the establishment, sat down in the woodshed door and chuckled in a knowing way. It was a theory of his that when a girl begins to call a young man a nice fellow she must be "pretty far gone."

"Oh, I reckon they's folks 't 'ud call 'im a nice feller," remarked Maud Eliza in a judicial manner that implied mental reservations in this particular case, though she thought best to speak in general terms.

"'N' they's fools in the world 't don't know a decent man when they lay eyes on 'im," said Maria, mimicking her sister's tone.

"'N' they's folks in this world 't's nothin' but fools when they think they're awful smart," retorted Maud Eliza, spurred into unusual mental activity by the consciousness that the red-headed stranger had paid very little attention to her. "They's fools in this world 't thinks they're *awful* smart," she added, cuttingly.

"Well, don't quar'l" quavered Mrs. Pugsley from her blankets, undertaking the part of peacemaker with her dreary formula. "The world's wide'nough to get along in 'thout quar'lin'."

"Some folks thinks red hair is purty," said Maud Eliza, flashing a glance of defiance at her sister, and descending with scornful dignity from the general to the particular. "'N' some folks thinks scrubby red moustaches is hansim 'n' genteel; but they's others in this world 't wouldn't look at 'em—thank the Lord!"

"Well—well!" put in Ephraim in his tone of reconciliation.

"They's folks in this world 't thinks dif'rent," added

Maud Eliza. "They's folks 't has better tastes, thank the Lord!"

"If she keeps 'er mouth a-goin' 'bout Billy Bling at that rate," declared Maria with the fire in her eye, "she'll git it slapped all over 'er face, fust thing she knows. Ye orter be 'shamed, after all he's done fer us. If I hadn't no more sense o' gratitude, I'd set down 'n' eat my ears!"

But Maud Eliza, far from feeling remorseful, sniffed disdainfully and commenced picking the window-sill with her pin once more. However, she was careful not to say anything further about red hair and scrubby moustaches after Maria's very definite threat about slapping.

Billy hurried away, blissfully ignorant of Maria's championship of him: perhaps he could not have been happier had he known. He was too glad even to want to sing—a mode of expression which he had hitherto found adequate to the exigencies of any sort of hilarity; he did not want to make any kind of noise; he wanted to let the thought of Maria fill him undisturbed by anything—he wanted to hurry on and do something for her and exult in the power to be of use to her. It seemed to him a wonderful thing that the people about the camp could not guess his errand—he knew they could not, though the world seemed so full of it; he could pass them face to face without one of them suspecting that he was high in the favor of the loveliest woman in all the world—that possibly he was making her love him for the service he was rendering her. He was glad people could not guess it—he wanted to be alone with his hopes and dreams. There would be time enough to enjoy the envy and congratulations of people hereafter.

Billy's regard for women had always been as widely removed as possible from love and passion; it had amounted to a tender reverence for them as the purest and best of God's creatures. He had memories of better

days than these he had passed in California—memories which came back to him fitfully with sweet messages, like winds breathing from a distance. The remembrance of his dead mother's love often recurred to him with a pang that was half-pleasant and made him long, in a helpless, desolate way, for a renewal of her caressing tenderness. He never in his thoughts classed the women of Havilah even generically with that dead mother, who had become to him the type of all true womanhood; they were monsters, a cross between brute and human, centering in themselves the worst qualities of each. But he could reconcile Maria with the image of his mother. He was sure she was kind of heart and would be a faithful, loving wife to the man who was fortunate enough to win her. He could imagine her in her maturity still more like the mother he had lost—kind and considerate, earnest and affectionate,—a softened image of her present contradictory self. His love for her was a growth so sudden as to produce some confusion in his thoughts, but he was very certain that she was the only woman in the world he could ever care for. He wondered, with a delicious sense of present enjoyment, how it was that he had never missed her in all these years when all at once she seemed so essentially a part of him. Possibly the time had been a preparation. At any rate, he was quite ready for her. He seemed to have been waiting for her without knowing it. That was why he recognized her so quickly and felt the need of her all in a moment. It does not take any man long to fall in love who has never had occasion to entrench himself in single blessedness by the cheerful recollection that Adam's was a helpmeet to evil; and this was especially true of Billy who, in matters of the heart, was utterly without experience and had formed but few opinions from observation. He was perfectly convinced that Maria was good; he felt as if he had known her and

had seen into her heart since the beginning of time. He could not understand Maria at once in all her preferences, but in a general way she was quite plain—a known island in the waste ocean of his ignorance of femininity. She explained herself in that mysterious thrill of sympathy which supplies the place of many reasons where love is deep and unselfish.

Billy did not have to go very far for the provisions, but it was far enough to give him all the time he needed to think of Maria. How different she was from these characterless, unwholesome women of Havilah—from her own gaseous mother and weak-minded sister, from all the women in the world, for that matter! She was the prototype of his conception of a perfect woman, honest, independent and affectionate. He returned to the cabin, smiling even more broadly than when he left it, and deposited his heap of provisions on the table. Maria came to his side at once and commenced untying the parcels.

“Lor’, if there ain’t the sandwitchers fin’ly ’n’ at last!” she cried in delight, carrying the package to her mother, and placing it at the moist woman’s side on the blanket. “Jes’ look at ’em, now, ma! Don’t them look good? Ain’t them darlin’s? ’N’ look at the mustard—’d ye ever see it spread ’s thick in all yer life ’fore? If them ain’t immense eatin’, now, ye may call *me* a buzzard!”

Mrs. Pugsley seemed to have recurred by intuition to the ancient theory of Protagoras, that on every subject contrary affirmations may be maintained.

“I’ve allus said as too much mustard ain’t good fer the lungs ’n’ liver,” she declared, drawing the sandwiches toward her with a sort of protesting acquiescence. Then, in her deposed empress tones: “Not ’t I have any call to complain, ’n’ not ’t I’m complainin’, but I’d like fer folks to know what they’re givin’ me ’n’ how it ’ll prob’ly act on my insides.”

“ Oh, it won’t hurt ye,” encouraged Maria.

Mrs. Pugsley waved her moist hand with the air of a mother disowning her daughter on the stage.

“ Ye never was half a Swipes, nohow,” she said. “ Not but what ye’re good to me, ’n’ all that ; but it’s like they was suthin’ atween us ’t won’t let ye onderstan’.”

She shook her head sadly and transferred her reproachful gaze to the sandwiches.

“ Not ’t I have any call to think ’t anybody keers ’bout the state o’ my lungs ’n’ liver ’nough to hender me from swollerin’ what ’s likely to hurt ’em,” she said, returning to a physiological contemplation of the subject. “ ’T ain’t that. The sooner my lungs ’n’ liver is gone ’n’ is no more, the better it’ll be fer all ; ’n’ mebbe that’s the idee ye have in mind in forcin’ ’em down me. I’ll eat the sandwiches ’n’ joyful, Mr. Bling, hopin’ they ’ll red the world o’ me.” She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and then lay back among the blankets and fell to eating.

Maria set about getting dinner at once. The stove was an increasing wonder to her. She found it a difficult feat to lift the stove-lids on the lifter without letting them fall ; the blaze shining through the draught in front delighted her ; the roar in the pipe was music, and the damper had to be adjusted continually to regulate the blaze exactly to her liking. That stove suggested unlimited culinary experiences ; it involved ever widening relations, ever new combinations, like the uses of scientific study. She felt as if it were destined to draw out all her latent capabilities—as if she were becoming educated by existing in its proximity.

“ I reckon stoves is common ’nough,” she remarked, poking the ashes away from the draught in front, “ but we’ve had to bile *our* kittle over a out-door fire ’most ever sence I can ’member. Ain’t it neat, though, to see how

the smoke all goes up the pipe 'n' not even a whiff into a feller's eyes? I'd no idee a stove was so handy."

"Ye ain't opened all the packages yit," said Billy.

"Why, sure 'nough," answered the girl. "Seems like when ma gits suthin' 't *she* likes, the rest o' us orter be satisfied; 'n' that stove *is* a dumplin', 'n' no mistake." She cast a backward admiring glance at it as she moved toward the table. "I could set by the hour and watch it."

"Well!" said Maud Eliza, somewhat sharply, "ye may set by the hour an watch it if ye like when dinner's over, but jes' now I want to say *my* insides is howlin' fer grub!"

"Well," said Maria, good-naturedly, "we'll see what we've got, then! Lor! a chunk o' bacon 't smells like it had been dropped straight from Paradise. That makes my stummick begin to talk, too. 'N' here's some crackers 'n' coffee; 'n' what's this? Butter? Good Lord! Look at that, ma! Butter to eat onto our crackers, 'stid o' bacon gravy! We ain't had no butter fer months afore, 'n' I vow I'd 'most fergot what 'twas like. Yes, 'n' pertaters; 'n' 'ere's a can o' peaches—them San José kind, 't melt in yer mouth 'n' slip down afore ye want 'em to. Well, well!" She stepped back and regarded Billy with a smile of cordial thanks. "Won't we have a sure-'nough feast now? 'N' all o' yer gettin', too! Mebbe we'll have a chance to do suthin' friendly fer *you* some day, 'n' we won't fergit this when our time comes!"

It was not a conventional scene between lovers, but it was a moment of peculiar sweetness to Billy. The pure spontaneity of her gratitude refreshed him, but he could not help feeling embarrassed by the thought that it was necessary for her to be grateful to him for anything. He wondered if she was not a little embarrassed, too; she did not seem so, but he had heard that women were able

to hide such emotions. He did not like the thought that she might feel under obligations to him ; there is always an element of discomfort in such a relation. He could not meet her eyes as he would like to have done. To cover his confusion he turned away and commenced fumbling among the contents of a little deal cupboard against the wall. Presently he produced a skillet from this hiding-place and set it on the stove-hearth.

"It'll want dustin' out a little, I reckon," he said. "It ain't been used for ever so long. It's what I had to cook bacon in when I lived 'ere by myself. I ain't used it more 'n two or three times sence I moved up in the hills, when I happened to be stayin' in camp off 'n' on. They's fat 'nough in the bacon to cook itself, ain't they? I thought I picked out a piece 't was fat 'nough fer that."

"Oh, yes," answered Maria. "They's fat 'nough—plenty, plenty! Don't it slice off beautiful? 'N' ain't them streaks o' lean in it good fer sore eyes? D'ye ever hear how the Mexicans feed their pigs every other day, so 's to make fust a streak o' fat 'n' then a streak o' lean? Lor', what a feast it is, to be sure!"

"I wish 't we had some flour to roll the slices in, don't you? I allus like bacon best 't's rolled in flour afore it's fried. It makes it tenderer."

"I do' know 's I ever et it that way," answered the girl. "I never heerd o' it. 'N' we ain't got no flour, nohow."

"No flour, nuther?" echoed Billy. "Why, what ye been livin' on?"

"Nothin', mos'ly," was the grim answer. "Oh, we're capable o' that," she added, lifting her eyes to his face as the assurance of his pity dawned upon her mind. "We're used to it."

"Well," said Billy with decision, "all I got to say is, ye ortn't to be used to it, 'n' I'm goin' to fetch a sack o'

flour aroun' this very afternoon, or have one sent. A feller must eat if he's goin' to live. It won't matter if we don't have none fer the bacon this time. Bacon's good anyhow ye fix it, ain't it, now? I swear," he added, with a laugh into which a note of dissatisfaction crept in spite of him as he thought of their forlorn condition, "ye folks *was* purty well cleaned out o' eatin' utensils."

"Yes, we was purty well cleaned out o' eatin' utensils," she replied, without hesitation. "We've been short fer a week now, 'n' the Lord only knows how we'd a-come out o' it if ye hadn't run onto us in that unexpected way. If ye'll send us the flour I'll see to it that it's paid back when dad gits to work."

"Oh, that's all right," answered Billy, indifferently.

Maria deposited the thin slices of fat in the skillet, and then turned to her mother, who was eating sandwiches after the manner of the sailor's wife who had chestnuts in her lap, "and munched, and munched, and munched."

"Ye feel better now," said the girl, measuring some coffee in her hand and throwing it into the simmering pot. "Ye look like ye'd took a new lease o' life a'ready. No more feelin' like a dead hoss dragged over a mountain trail, ma! No more groanin' 'n' sighin', eh, ma? La! only think, a good dry ruff 'n' three hull rooms to ourselves—why, it's princely, that's what 'tis! Run out into the woodshed, quick, Maud Elizy, 'n' fetch 'nother armful o' wood! Lor', what changes they is in life! Only think o' this 'n' then how we was fixed this mornin'!"

"Yes, it's princely," replied Mrs. Pugsley, with a dreary shake of her head and the conscious look of one who is descending to an untimely grave. "I know it's princely, 'n' ain't I proud 'n' grateful 'n' happy? But why couldn't it a-come sooner? The Lord don't treat me right, nohow; He ain't fair—He never was. But I don't complain. It's more like the Swipeses 'n what I

ever 'spected to be agin. I don't complain." And she groaned.

"Oh, ye'll be all right to-morrer," said Maria, cheerfully. "Only think o' sleepin' under a dry ruff wunst more—why it's like ole times up to Nevady City, 'n' ye allus said that was 'zackly like the Swipses. Don't that bacon smell good, though? M-m-my!"

Mrs. Pugsley finished her third sandwich and stretched herself out on her blankets, looking very weak and watery.

"Well, I swear!" cried Billy, suddenly, springing toward the door. "If there ain't Jim Hulse after his hosses! Ain't I a good 'un to fergit 'em like that? He must a-had to foller me all aroun' the camp to find 'em. 'Fore Jack, I'm ruther 'shamed o' that!"

"Oh, I reckon it won't hurt yer Jim Hulse to stretch his legs a little," answered Maria, carelessly, not looking up from the sputtering bacon which she was poking with a fork.

Billy heard her, but did not wait to answer. He strode rapidly toward the gate, where a man stood as if expecting him.

CHAPTER XII.

MARIA came to the door in an interval of her cooking to get a breath of air and a glimpse of the man who "read books" and had the reputation of a quondam murderer.

"He ain't a bit hansim," was her first thought. And then, "I wonder what he could reely a-done. He looks like he hated hisself 'n' everybody."

She could not take her eyes off him.

"Whatever he's done," she thought, with an inward thrill, like the flutter of wings in a lone thicket, "he's sorry fer it now. Nobody could have that look 'n' not be repentant. He don't look ezackly good, but he looks lonesome 'n'—'n' wonderful."

She almost wished, with a little rush of warmth through her heart, that she knew him and could befriend him and make him forget how lonesome the world was. For he seemed lost in this big, bare landscape—lost and helpless and sorrowful. And then she fell to wondering what in the world she could find to say if by chance she were obliged to speak to him. She couldn't imagine anything he would care to hear her talk about. He seemed such a poor listener when Billy talked. But, of course, Billy was not very interesting.

"I reckon I better keep away from 'im," she thought, and the warm feeling died out and left a queer little chill in its place. "They ain't no tellin' what he might do if he was stirred up."

Presently the horses were unharnessed, and Hulse turned and spoke in a low tone to Billy. Maria could not hear what he said, but she noticed his unintentional

tone of patronage, which somehow seemed just, and not to be resented. The tone was not unfriendly ; it was supremely indifferent, yet pervaded by the indescribable accent of one who speaks across a social gulf. Billy did not notice—perhaps he tacitly admitted the other's superiority.

"He *is* a queer man," she said, interested and awed. "What *could* he a-done, I wonder?"

In her unusual concentration of thought she had spoken aloud, and the sound of her own voice startled her. It startled Maud Eliza, too, who was thrumming against the window-sill.

"Seems like *all* the men's queer in this country," tittered the girl. "I ain't seen one yit 't *I'd* have."

"Oh, shet up!" cried Maria, with sudden irritation.

Maud Eliza made up a face and commenced to sing provokingly to the accompaniment of her rapid tattoo on the window-ledge:

"Granny, will yer dog bite, dog bite, dog bite?"

Granny, will yer dog bite?

No, child, no!"

But for a wonder Maria turned her back, resolved not to hear. She wanted to improve all the time while Hulse was there in trying to make him out. She wondered what there was in him that insisted itself on her so. Yes, she could imagine that he had murdered some one, she could even fancy the victim's sensations while looking up into those burning eyes.

While she mused thus in her rapid way, he suddenly raised his eyes and looked her full in the face. She could not meet his gaze—it cowed and frightened her, and she shrank back as if from a draught of stifling air. The eyes with the smothered fire in them rested on her only an instant—indeed, she was not sure that he saw her at all. He seemed to look through and beyond her

at something afar off; it was a look so intent and wide-reaching, so regardless of adjacent objects that she felt a desire to turn and discover the object which had so fixed his regard. But all at once he turned his back on her and said something in a low tone to Billy.

In another moment he mounted one of the horses, and then his face was toward her again. She was glad that Billy was not looking in her direction, and could not see the flush that leaped to her forehead and made her feel helpless and foolish. Hulse could not help noticing her this time, standing as she was in his direct line of vision—must observe that her dress was soiled and torn, that her hair was uncombed, her shoes down at heel, and, worse than all, that the hot blood was flaming in her face—a phenomenon which he would doubtless construe into a shamefaced confession of untidiness—possibly into an admission of fear of his censure. The thought angered her strangely; she could not bear the idea that he should pass judgment on her in that lordly way. Billy might put up with such condescension if he chose, but she never would. What right had he to judge her? Was not she her own mistress? She would have none of his patronage and fine airs. His criticism was a menace to her independence; her strong self-love shrank from his mysterious interference as her healthy body shrank from the prospect of illness.

In a sudden paroxysm of rage she entered the house and slammed the door behind her, to let him know once for all how much she cared for his opinion. She reckoned she had a right to dress as she chose, for all of him, or not dress at all, if it suited her better. *He* hadn't bought her clothes for her; *he* had nothing to say about how often she should wash them. She longed to shout her derision and defiance of him, to stand somewhere in full view and say nasty things about his clothes. which,

when all was said, were no cleaner nor better than her own. His overalls were all over mud at that minute, and she would like to tell him of it, only she could not picture him caring for such spitefulness from anybody, much less from her. He would sit there just as calm as ever and look superior and say nothing back. Well, then, she would say nothing, either; but she wished she had made her most hideous face at him before she slammed the door—the face she scared intrusive little boys with when they strayed too near the wagon. That face was Maria's masterpiece. It was made by stretching her mouth as far as possible with her thumbs and drawing down her lower eyelids with her forefingers, till nothing but the red and white showed; and to this fiendish appearance she added a deathly horror by grating her teeth together or running out her tongue and groaning. She wished she had done that to Hulse to express her contempt for him.

While these thoughts flashed through her mind, she was moving toward the window, as if drawn by some power beyond herself, and now, with an anxiety which she would have scorned in another, she was peering out to discover how much Hulse was annoyed and disconcerted by her violent declaration of independence. She found him seated precisely as she had last seen him, with his eyes directed toward the doorway in that absent, vision-seeing manner, evidently unconscious of her having left the spot or having been there. Her anger had been all for nothing, then,—he had not even seen her! Could it be possible?—he had been looking directly toward her when she shut the door. And yet there could be no doubt about it—he had not seen her at all. She believed that he was capable of it, he was capable of anything; she was certain now that he had murdered cart-loads of men. She could have cried with vexation and rage. To

her the passive contempt of indifference was hardly less bitter than the active contempt of criticism.

It is a dark cavity that contains the human brain ; and perhaps that is why our good and evil impulses so often get mixed and huddled together in frightened groups of contradictions. Before resuming her cooking, Maria—all the time bitterly resentful of this stranger who had somehow interfered with her spiritual life—laced her shoes more carefully than she had done for a month before, and smoothed her hair a little ; then looking down at her dress, she resolved that before another day passed that garment should be washed, and ironed, and mended, if the deed was the last of her life. She wasn't going to have people looking down on her if a little soap and water could prevent it—though where the soap was to come from was an unsolved mystery.

And the next moment she wheeled around completely, vowing that she would daub herself from head to foot with dirt and grease and pass that Jim Hulse on the street, wagging her head and running out her tongue at him. Yes, that is what she would do. Who was he, she would like to know, that he should turn up his nose at her as if she was no better than the sidewalk for him to run over ? Was he any better than she ? At any rate, she hadn't murdered cart-loads of men, women, and children.

But, after all, he had not turned up his nose at her ; he had not even seen her. And she had been a fool to slam the door in his face ; he would not have cared even had he happened to notice. And just at this point a drop of fat from the frying bacon must have sputtered into Maria's face, for she wiped her eyes on her apron and rubbed them particularly hard. Could she have analyzed her feelings, she might have discovered that she was less angry with this enigmatic stranger than with herself for appearing before him in such shabby array.

Billy stayed to dinner, and was as gay as possible, but his appetite was not good. (Has the reader noticed the mysterious effect which love has on digestion?) He enjoyed seeing the others eat, however, and cracked jokes in a way that was alarming. Mrs. Pugsley rose to the occasion by seeing the company seated around the table on empty candle boxes before taking her own place, her wildly regal manner suggesting a histrionic attempt at an Eastern empress collecting her troops. She ate heartily, in spite of her three formidable sandwiches, and evidently enjoyed her dinner, though she managed to impress Billy with the idea that hearty eating was one phase of her polymorphous misery.

Maria ate even less than Billy, and she seemed absent-minded, but the young man was not disturbed by that. At table she addressed him only once of her own accord, and that was to inquire whether Hulse—she called him “that Hulse”—objected to the use to which his horses had been put that morning. On being answered in the negative, she looked relieved, as if she had half expected the owner of the animals to entertain prejudices against the promiscuous transportation of unfortunate and slatternly females around the country.

The fact was, she was not at all herself. A sense of shame oppressed her; she kept trying to understand why she cared so much about what had happened. She had studied her own mind so little all her life long that an attempt at introspection at this late day met with opaque resistances as impassable as if she had been trying to pass, ghost-like, through an unopened door.

She was glad when the meal was over, glad when her mother spread herself out on the blankets once more and prepared to go to sleep, glad when her father and Billy went out together to look around the yard. She would not let Maud Eliza do the dishes, though that hilarious

damsel offered ; she wanted to do them herself. A bit of familiar work gave her, as it were, a grip on the reality of things. After the dishes were done she went out and sat down alone on the veranda steps, still thinking ; and before she knew it the cottonwoods, at which she was looking fixedly, had grown dim as spiders' webs tangled in the air, the river had diminished to a dotted line and a dull sound, and she could not see the mountains at all ; and then with a start she became aware that her eyes were brimming over with tears. She wiped them away on her apron—she wondered what Hulse would think if he saw how soiled that apron was—and winked so fast and hard that the tears could not come again ; and presently it entered her mind that if she could have appeared at the door in a garnet cashmere dress and long gold earrings—in her fondest imaginings Maria had sometimes pictured herself in that garnet cashmere, with a silk panel of the same shade—her impressions of “that Hulse” would have been much pleasanter. Perhaps he would have looked at her approvingly and smiled ; but no, she could not imagine him smiling. But it would have been something to know that she had no reason to be ashamed of herself.

The polite reader who has studied women and the doctrines of Leibnitz may find in Maria a partial confirmation of the philosopher's theory of the sameness of indiscernibles.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE light of love draws many virtuous plants from the soil on which it falls. Hitherto Billy Bling had never experienced any longing for an ideal personal excellence, but all at once he wished with the earnestness of his whole soul that he were a better man and more worthy of the woman whom this day had brought into his life. Such dissatisfaction is an assurance of a changed future.

It was late in the afternoon when he bade Maria good-bye on the porch, promising, in answer to her iterated invitation—for his departure roused her from her absent-mindedness and awakened in her a knowledge of what she owed to his kindness—that he would drop in often and be sociable. The idea of dropping in often and being sociable filled his mind with a series of homelike pictures of himself and her together in the front room of the little house, while the rest of the family were conveniently disposed of in the vague background till their presence was required at table or some other family rite. He went around to one of the stores and ordered a new supply of groceries to be sent to the cabin next day—Maria had assured him that she had enough already to last a week, but no other possible attention presented itself to his mind—and then started for home. He passed up the gentle slope between the river and the foothills, smiling as he thought of all the pleasant things that had happened to him during the day. He was very glad that Hulse had wanted him to go for the horses—very glad he had been idle at the moment and able to go. How queer it was to think of what he would have missed

had he worked that day as usual! Billy's nature was essentially a poetical one, though he was unaware of the fact, and he liked to imagine the consequences attending actions which had never taken place. He could hardly imagine himself ignorant of Maria's coming, even if he had stayed at home. Something would have told him—some influence in the air would have announced it. And it was so queer—he could not recover from the wonder of it—that he had never thought of her before, never dreamed of her, never longed for her—never, before to-day. And yet more marvellous was the apparent contradiction that she did not seem a stranger to him, that her voice was familiar, that her face suggested a dim, haunting memory, as a gratified desire suggests the ungratified longing. It was all strange, and beautiful, and unreal.

After leaving the valley his path lay through the cool, still gulches. There it was almost dark; the sun had sunk behind the high black walls, though out in the valley the day still shone. Here and there, far above him, bits of purple or saffron-colored rock thrilled warmly under the touch of a belated sunbeam, looking like points of flame above the encroaching shadows. The trail ascended for some time along the steep grade of a small stream—a stream whose lips seemed shaped only for laughter, like a healthy child's. A sudden narrowing of the little cañon, then a sharp turn to the left, brought him face to face with a waterfall leaping down a wall of white rocks and illuminated dazzlingly by a flash of sunshine which streamed through a small lateral gorge facing the west. Seen from the gloom from which Billy approached, the high white waterfall, swaying and fluttering among the shadows, looked like a restless, sheeted ghost. At a nearer view the apparition lost its ghostly aspect, and the gleam on the white rocks and the waver-

ing water changed to such a light as Eastern travellers say flashes from the wings of a flock of storks stirring and mounting upward among the sunbeams. Near the cabin stood an evergreen oak. The sunshine fell upon it also, so that the late-clinging waxen berries of the mistletoe were still visible among its branches. The wind kissed the heavy leaves into slow motion and whispered all sorts of aerial secrets. Winds are the souls of dead poets; they breathe upon us fully the music of distant worlds, which living poets catch and repeat brokenly.

Billy neither saw nor heard anything. For all he noticed on the way to his cabin, he might as well have been transported to the spot in his sleep. He became conscious of the earth's existence and his own after he had been standing for some time in front of the waterfall and gazing down toward the west. He had lived a long life of adventure since leaving the place; events had been heaping upon him; he had experienced everything that was worth experiencing in life.

He saw things in new forms and combinations. It was like beginning life all over again, and how pleasant that was! Was this the same grim old earth he had been plodding around on all these years—were these the old familiar, monotonous surroundings?

The sun was low on the mountain-tops; like a tired king, oppressed with his own glory, he sank to rest on his high bed. Billy sat down under the oak and gazed out at the evening changes as if watching the sun set for the first time. The slant rays from behind a far-off peak radiated like a quiver of arrows on an Indian's broad shoulder; the west was a sea-green expanse of sky with a fringe of fire. Then the light faded—how soon it always fades! The shadows are so eager to take its place. Suddenly a south wind stirred along the sky and the white star-lilies burst into blossom. So the night came,

Billy gazed long, and yet he had something better to think of than the stars or the sunset. Maria had laid her hand in his at parting. What was there to think of in all the world but that? And she had smiled and asked him to come often. Was there a Paradise beyond such happiness? He was delirious with hope; he could think of nothing distinctly but Maria and the future. She had been in the world all these years and he had not known it. He repeated that idea constantly, foolishly—he sent his thoughts again and again over his little world of knowledge, trying vainly to find some analogy to this solemn, happy experience. Ah, that never-to-be-forgotten day of youth, when love puts out to sea with sweet trust in favoring winds! Storm and shipwreck may follow, but the day has been lived, and death itself can not obliterate it from God's record of earthly happiness and good.

Billy rose from his seat under the oak tree and paced up and down the path before his cabin door, adjusting himself to this new-found ecstasy. Occasionally he paused to gaze up into the clear sky, to listen to the music of the pines and the waterfall, or watch the ripples at his feet as they cast up the white, drowned stars from their depths. Maria was come! The winds repeated it, the waters sang it, the night was full of the thought. Nature, with whom Billy had lived face to face for years, was his friend and partook of his joy. He was sure the trees were glad with him, that the wind and water sympathized. How complete the world seemed, and yet how prophetic of something better than mere completeness! It was as if, while listening to sweet music, he were straining above and beyond it toward some faint, inarticulate melody full of a diviner meaning than the earthly, audible tones.

His future took more definite shape, like a city viewed from a hill. In the thought of Maria, all good seemed

possible. She was a reminder of his better, half-forgotten past ; she necessitated a renewal of the best part of him. A desire to be something better for her sake,—something that she could look upon with love and generous praise, overpowered him like a slow-swelling surge that bears all before it. The discords of his life melted away, absorbed like the noises of the street in a sudden full peal of church bells that summon the soul to prayer. He felt for the first time that it is a good thing to live, that life means something more than breathing and working, or even playing ; that it means a daily renewal of kindly human deeds and affections, of living thoughts and acts of self-forgetfulness. A vision of the world, as seen through the medium of his own experience and observation, passed before him and filled him with compassion for his kind—a vision of human beings who crawl out of the dust, wallow in the dust a while, and then return to dust again ; of tear-white faces of men and women who struggle and strive and fail and fill the world with the discords of selfishness. How miserable to-night seemed all human lives except such as had found out the uses of earnest, unselfish love ! Something of the real holiness of life, of God's meaning in man, for the moment likened the poor miner to the seer.

A little later, in the calmness of retrospection, Billy thought of his past with thankfulness that Maria knew nothing of it. True, she had probably seen nothing better in the lives of the men around her, but that fact neither signified that she had deserved such associates nor that she ought to continue in their company. She was good herself—her frank independence, her tenderness for her mother, her hearty, joyous laugh, like a boy's, her very tyranny over her father, left him in no doubt about that, and in common justice she ought to associate with people as good as herself. Billy, like the average lover, was capable of attaching all abstract virtues to the con-

crete being whom he loved, but he felt it in him to go farther and endeavor to make himself the practical equal of his ideal. He resolved hereafter to find amusement only in his work, and live altogether in the thought of her approbation. Her approbation would keep him in the straight way if anything could.

Not that Billy had ever been a hardened outlaw or a leader of others into crooked ways. His sins had been the sins of compliance; he would always rather participate than plan. Besides, his conscience had never lost sight of him, and whenever his actions overreached the average wrong to which he had accustomed himself, he felt the pangs of remorse in so lively a manner that he was careful of his conduct for a long time after. But now, measured by the standard of what Maria's lover ought to be, he recognized in himself a hardened sinner, unworthy to touch even the hem of her garment. She showed him his childhood side by side with his manhood and made him ashamed.

When Billy came to California a helpless, untried boy, he did as the Californians did, not because he found any genuine pleasure therein, but because it was easier to conform than protest. He smoked, he drank, he gambled, he laughed at the sayings and doings of the lewd women who dominated the mines; and all this without forgetting his mother's teachings, but only as a make-shift for the better things he intended to do when circumstances should allow him to be himself without incurring the inconvenience of ridicule.

But that time never came. Each day was a repetition of yesterday. Example, to which his compliant nature was always disposed to yield, became the gauge of his actions; his self-condemnatory moments grew rarer and rarer, until he wore into the common shape, and the details of his experience became mere repetitions of the

experience of the men he followed. He never thought of a better condition of things for himself except in a worldly and material sense; he saw nothing better in life than to work till Saturday night and then come into camp for his spree with the others. The devil had made friends with him and would not quit him, and as the old gentleman was, on the whole, rather agreeable,—at least more agreeable than he would have been as an adversary,—Billy did not try strenuously to shake him off. Compliance is so easy for easy people who dread rebuke; they move readily in the oiled groove of circumstance, and make no noise in the world, discordant or otherwise.

At last Billy turned away and sought his heap of blankets in the cabin. There he lay looking out of the little window at the clouds which lay vaguely against the moonlit sky and listening to the mysterious whisperings of the night; but his thoughts were down in the valley where Maria was. What an inspiration to accompany him into the land of dreams, the thought that she was not far off, that he could see her again to-morrow and next day and next day, week after week, perhaps for the rest of his life! This was living indeed! His love had blossomed in one supreme moment, covering the barrenness of his soul with a growth as fresh and sweet and wholesome as the first grass which sprang up at the direct command of God. And at last he fell asleep, with the water calling, calling, even in his dreams, like voices that speak brokenly but lovingly from a distance.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALL the next morning Billy kept conscientiously at work with pick and shovel, often singing in time to his rhythmic blows on the rock—singing not so melodiously, perhaps, as the birds sing, and yet with the very spirit of the birds, because the winter was over, it was mating-time, and the riot of inward happiness must find vent somehow, no matter if only the rocks and trees were there to listen. I fear he would not have worked at all that morning had he consulted his own inclinations; but he had a faint recollection that ladies were not in the habit of receiving calls early in the day—a custom whose significance he could not fathom, but which he felt constrained to observe, out of deference to prejudice and custom; and until such time as he could go to Maria, digging was as good as anything to pass away the time. Work was not work in the company of such thoughts as Billy had. He could hardly imagine himself disliking anything laborious hereafter; Maria's name was an all-potent spell for the transformation of unpleasant things; in it he felt the power of ancient magicians to exorcise evil spirits, drive away storms and pestilence, and cure all manner of diseases.

At noon he set his pick and shovel behind the cabin door, swallowed some cold boiled beans—as to their quantity or quality he had not the faintest idea—washed them down with cold coffee, and proceeded to make his toilet. And a truly primitive toilet it was. First he went out to the pool beneath the waterfall, where, in the quiet, shallow margin, the blue water was dappled with clouds

and the rocks and trees were glassed as in a mirror; here he stripped himself and waded out under the foaming waterfall and stood there five minutes or more, enjoying such a bath as the naiads of old might have envied; then, all wet and shining and agitated by delicious shivers, he put on his clothes with the jubilant exhalation that "cold water is the life of a man." Next he reëntered the cabin and brushed his red hair carefully into what Californians call a "cow-lick"—a system of combing which in the mines is considered equivalent to a verbal declaration of social reform; then he examined his dirty boots with a critical eye, shook his head doubtfully, then half determined to clean them, but finally concluded the operation would take too much time; and, last of all, he donned a stupendous necktie that suggested mingled thunder and lightning and human gore, eyed himself complacently in his little cracked mirror, and started on his visit to Maria.

He wondered how she would look at him, what her first words would be. Friendly, he hoped—nay, he was sure of so much. He felt already good friends with her, but—might not a fellow (Billy meant himself by the generic term) reasonably look for something more than mere friendliness in her glance? He could not be sure of anything more than good fellowship yesterday, though once or twice he half believed there might be. One of Maria's charms lay in the fact that a man couldn't read her all at once; the windings of her character had to be followed and studied; and what could be more agreeable than the investigation of such phenomena? She was as full of meaning as the picture of an unfamiliar city, and though he could only guess at the ultimate leading of her by-ways and thoroughfares, he was more than satisfied with her general plan.

Maria met him at the door, handsome and smiling.

She had such a wonderful way of being friendly, Billy thought. She shook hands with him cordially—more than cordially—she gave his hand an unmistakable squeeze. Billy liked that, and squeezed back very hard, hoping she would do it again; but she didn't. She drew her hand away with a little laugh, but somehow he understood that she was not offended at his squeezing back. Altogether Maria in the flesh was better, if possible, than the spiritual Maria who had kept him awake the night before.

"We ain't got no chairs yit," she said in her healthy, hearty voice, placing a candle-box by the front window for him to sit on. "After dad gits to work we can have some, I hope. We ain't had no chairs o' our own fer years 'n' years—how long ago was it 't we had them painted chairs in the room back o' the saloon in Nevady City, ma,—when dad run the Pug Dog, don't ye 'member? Lor', it must a-been fourteen or fifteen year ago—I know I wa'n't nothin' but a little teeny kid. Whatever becomes o' the time, I'm sure I can't tell."

Billy sat down on the box by the window, as happy as a king on his throne. And yet, after that first overflow of confidence, he felt strangely silly and confused. He dared not look into Maria's face lest she should see the gladness in his eyes and demand the cause of it. He wondered what she really thought of his squeezing her hand in that fashion—surely she couldn't have forgotten such an event already, though he had to confess she looked mightily unconcerned. He wondered how he had dared to do it, even though she led him on—possibly it was a mistake after all, and he had only dreamed it. Anyway, he was sure he would never venture on such familiarity again; she might resent it a second time, though she passed it over so smoothly the first. She ought to have boxed his ears—it would have served him

right. Not that he was sorry for what he had done—on the contrary; only it *was* a bold thing to do with a girl like Maria. He looked confusedly out at the sky, where the scattered clouds lay light as pollen dust—at the river, where the shadows fell in the water scarcely darker than the sunshine. How bright everything was—how full of music! He himself seemed floating on waves of slow melody.

He did not dare to turn and look at Maria, but he felt the need of saying something, as people in a bashful mood always do. With his face still averted toward the river, he managed to begin :

“Oh, ye’ll like it ’ere, I’m sure!” he said.

He was so happy himself that it seemed as if everybody, especially Maria, must be likewise. She had an effect on him like a draught of delicious wine.

“Oh, I ain’t afeerd o’ that,” she answered.

He managed to take his eyes from the river, but even yet he could not look at her. He glanced around the room in a furtive, exploratory way, and noticed that the floors had been scrubbed and the windows washed.

Maria followed his glance and laughed. She understood his confusion, he was sure, and yet she never said a word to lessen it. But that is the way with women, Billy thought. They like to make a fellow uncomfortable just to show their power, and they may feel as friendly as possible toward him all the time. But the thought that he must be appearing awkward in her eyes filled him with the resolution to appear more off-hand and easy, no matter at what expense of will-power he had to accomplish it. With commendable boldness he fixed his eyes on the wall about two feet above her head and managed to articulate :

“Ye’ve been cleanin’ house ’n’ makin’ things comfortable, I see.”

“Yes, a little,” she answered. She did not seem inclined to help him at all. Cruel Maria!

The knowledge that she had left him to work out his own salvation filled him with a spasmodic energy.

“Ye ain’t one o’ the sort to let the grass grow under yer feet,” he said, in a complimentary tone.

“Yes, I stirred aroun’ a little this forenoon. The floor ’n’ winders ’d been callin’ fer water fer months. Things gen’rally was ruther dirty. La, this is suthin’ like livin’, this is. Why, it’s lux’ry! Don’t ye think the room looks better?”

After that the ice seemed broken, and Billy felt easier. He glanced around the room with smiling approval and laughed for very joy. It seemed so natural for Billy to laugh. Maria liked to hear him, and so she laughed too, in sympathy; and then they looked at each other rather consciously, and of course Billy blushed. But he was determined not to be bashful any more. Underneath Maria’s coquetry he perceived the warmth of a cordial reception, and that made him bold.

“Well, I should say it *does* look better!” he cried. “If I had a million dollars this minute, I’d lay every cent o’ it ye won’t be bothered with a red ant here all summer.”

“Why?” asked Maria.

“They’ll fall down on sech a slick floor ’n’ break their necks, every mother’s son o’ ’em!” he said with enthusiasm. Then he flushed and laughed, and Maria laughed with him again.

“Now, *you!*” she reproved him, shaking her head and lifting her face. “Ye’re allus flatterin’. Ye fergit ’t praise to the face is open disgrace.”

“Then I’m disgraced forever, ’n’ proud o’ it!” cried Billy, with increasing boldness. “’N’ I ain’t a-goin’ to take back a word o’ what I said. ’N’ I’m a-goin’ to add to it ’t ye’re a nat’ral-born housekeeper, M—m—Miss Mariar!”

And then he stopped. He was afraid he ought to have called her Miss Pugsley.

But she did not seem to notice.

“Much *you* know 'bout housekeepin’,” she said, still shaking her head and smiling. “‘N’ ’tain’t much ’t I know 'bout it, nuther, to tell the truth. But now ’t I’ve got a home o’ my own I intend to learn, ’n’ ye’ll see wonders aroun’ the place ’ere if ye keep yer eye peeled. Ye mus’ come in often—every day—’n’ see how I improve.”

Billy turned away his face to hide the new flush of pleasure he felt surge across it. An ancient god who felt himself the owner of a rich temple never was so divinely proud and happy as was Billy at that moment.

“Thankee, M—m—Miss Mariar,” he stammered.

This time she noticed the hesitation and formality with which he pronounced her name.

“Oh, leave off the handle,” she said, easily. “I ain’t none o’ yer fine folks, ’n’ style don’t go on me. Call me jes’ plain Mariar.”

Billy sank back in a state of beatitude, unable to utter a sound for very happiness. What a wonderful, off-hand way she had of doing things, to be sure! What a comfort it was to sit in the same room with her, feel her near presence, note her quick smiles, and know that she was not altogether indifferent to his friendship! It was like the warmth of a blazing fire after a day in the snow and wind—nay, it was like something more rapturous than that—he could not tell what it was like. And what a stupendously wonderful thing a beautiful woman is, altogether! Billy had never noticed before what long, rich eyelashes some women have, what redness of lips and cheeks, what brightness of eyes, and into what distracting little wavy lines some women’s hair arranges itself! And then that smooth curve of the cheek just where the ear

begins and the throat ends ; the ears themselves, like the pretty pink shells he had seen in the curiosity shops in the city ; and the throat and chin—the sudden discovery of such multitudinous charms almost took his breath away. He felt like one who is in contact with unknown things ; he had never noticed that women were in any way like that. And there she sat, smiling demurely while he examined her, as if unconscious of everything. He wanted to reach out and touch her, to make sure that she was really there.

He would have liked it better—granting that such a thing were possible—had she displayed some such signs of confusion as he was sure she had noticed in him, but he satisfied himself with the assurance that she was not the woman to fall in love at first sight ; she must have time and circumstance before she could come to it. All he could do at present was to be good friends with her, make her feel his love in silence, teach her to think of him and need his presence. Billy was capable of some selfish calculation even in the unselfishness of his love. He must keep the other men of Havilah away, and he could accomplish that best by being so kind to her that she would have no need of other friendship. If she could not love him at once fully, as he loved her, she could learn, if no other man interfered. Her friendship for him was a warrant that he could place himself near her and surround her with kindnesses. This was his way of fortifying the city and garrisoning it with soldiers.

“ Ma didn’t want me to slick up at all,” said Maria presently, glancing at her mother who lay on the blankets with her eyes shut, but with the unmistakable look of an invalid who knows that the condition of her health is noted. “ She said things was good ’nough as they was. But I reckon she’s better satisfied now ’t it’s all over, ain’t ye, ma ? ”

Mrs. Pugsley did not uncloset her eyes but drew her lank knees up to her chin.

"That bacon 't we had fer dinner was too fat 'n' nobody can change my mind o' it," she declared with more than her usual decision. "I've allus stuck to it as fat meat o' any kind ain't good for the lungs."

"She's tired, ma is—pore ole ma!" said Maria. "She don't git 's much joy out o' the new house 's what I do. But she'll have a good chance to rest now. We've all o' us been on the go long 'nough, the Lord knows—'n' ma specially."

Billy never knew in talking to Mrs. Pugsley whether he ought to be melancholy or in high spirits—melancholy from sympathy or in high spirits with the hope of cheering her up, so compromised the matter by trying to look both ways and succeeded in looking neither.

"Maud Elizy's som'ers aroun'. She went into the woodshed to change 'er shoes. Shall I call 'er?" asked Maria.

"Oh, I reckon ye needn't bother 'er," answered Billy with self-denial. "I ain't a-goin' to stay long."

Maria laughed.

"I reckoned ye might want to see 'er," she said, demurely.

And then Billy laughed sheepishly.

"I thought we was goin' to be good friends 'n' all that," she added after a moment. "'N' here ye begin by sayin' ye ain't goin' to stay long. That ain't no way."

"Then I'll take it back 'n' say I've come to stay forever."

"Oh, don't!" cried Maria, flinging up her hands in mock horror. "I never could stan' that, I'm sure! One man in the fam'ly 's all I can go."

And then they both laughed again.

"I d' know where dad is," she went on. "Mebbe he'll be in purty quick. I reckon he's out som'ers tryin'

to sponge a drink off 'm some o' the saloons, like he's been doin' all his life. Oh, well! I allus want 'im to have 'nough to keep 'im good-natured. He's a terror when he runs short, 'n' I have to watch 'im every minute to keep 'im from 'busin' ma. When he gits suthin' to do, we won't have nothin' more to ask fer, seems to me."

"Oh, he can git work easy enough. If he can't do no better I'll give 'im a job on my claim up the gulch, there. He can get good wages anywheres if he can dig."

Maria shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't b'lieve he'll dig," she said. "He never has, so fur. He allus calc'lates on packin' or teamin' where other folks has to do most o' the liftin'. He's a lazy ole cove, dad is. I never seen a porer imitation o' a man."

"He married a Swipes," articulated Mrs. Pugsley, with her eyes still shut. "'N' all the Swipeses from Adam down was proud 'n' scorned to work."

"It might a-been better fer 'em if they *had* worked," declared Maria. It was the first time Billy ever heard her say anything in disapproval of her mother. "'Tain't 's disgraceful to work 's tis to starve or steal or—or go dirty."

Mrs. Pugsley groaned and shook her head. She had regulated her life according to a contrary system of ethics.

CHAPTER XV.

"WELL, well," said Billy in a confident tone, "prob'ly yer daddy'll git suthin' to suit 'im 'fore long. I'll look aroun' 'n' see what I can do fer 'im. I've got friends 'ere 't may be useful."

Maria thanked him with a look.

"Dad's slower 'n the wrath o' heaven when work's the talk," she said. "'N' it 'ud be jes' like 'im to give ye mud if ye took pains to find suthin' fer 'im, 'n' say 'twas too hard fer his frame, or suthin'. That's the kind o' dandelion he is."

"Oh, I reckon he'll come to time," answered Billy. "They's purty sure to be teamin' o' some sort. Have ye been out aroun' the camp yit to look at things?" He asked the question with the sly intention of discovering whether she had met with the masculine admiration he was sure would be hers when she went abroad. "'Tain't much o' a place," he added, to take off what seemed to him the wiry edge of his remark.

Maria looked down at her dress.

"Lor'!" she exclaimed. "Been aroun' the camp? I should say not! I never heerd tell o' the likes o' you men, to think a woman can clean house 'n' gad the streets 'n' do forty-'leven other things to wunst! What d' ye reckon we're made of, anyhow?"

Billy wanted to answer "sugar candy," but did not dare.

"'N' while I had a fire I done a bakin', too—the best bread ye ever flopped a lip over, if I do say it myself 't made it—a-raisin' up out o' the pan till ye'd think it was

goin' through the ruff o' the house 'n' clean up to glory. D'ye reckon 't a woman 't does all that in a forenoon 's got time to go a-sailin' up 'n' down the streets? Well!" she laughed, but there was a ring in her voice that made Billy look at her curiously.

" 'N' 'sides all that, I washed my other dress this mornin'—the one I wore yesterday." Here a slight flush came into her forehead. "'N' I ain't got but two, so I had to put this 'ere one on. I hope ye won't look at it clost, fer it's awful—wuss 'n the other one."

"Awful?" echoed Billy. "Not at all!"

"Oh, yes, 'tis. Don't tell *me*. It's a heap wuss 'n the other one, 'n' that was bad 'nough, goodness knows. I'm goin' to wash this one, too, soon's the other dries 'n' I git it done up. It's sech a nuisance to have only two dresses!"

"Ye orter have a hundred thousand," declared Billy.

"Oh, I reckon I'd be contented with three or four. I've kep' purty clost to the house to-day fer fear some 'un 'ud see me lookin' so. I don't want folks a-lookin' down on *my* dirty clo'se," she added, somewhat fiercely.

Her change of tone and manner puzzled him.

"I'm sure I never thought o' lookin' down on yer clo'se," he said, taking her words as an accusation against himself.

At this point in the conversation Mrs. Pugsley stirred and opened her eyes. Billy had entirely forgotten her.

"Ye'll have to pick out the lean bacon fer me nex' time. Mariar," she said, with the air of one who is conscious of a too exquisite sensibility to uncongenial influences. "I've allus said as my lungs was too weak fer fat meat." And she spread herself out on her blankets, and incorporate dampness. Billy wished heartily that she could have lain quiescent a moment longer, for when she got started there was no telling how long she might keep it up, and

he wanted to fathom the mystery of Maria's changed manner. To be obliged to listen to the old woman at this moment was distressing—it was to be tortured by the boots of love, as Shakespeare puts it.

Maria did not notice her mother's interruption. She seemed to be thinking of other things.

The moist woman continued :

“When the weather gits settled 'n' the roads dry up so 't I can git out doors agin 'n' my side quits a draggin' the breath out o' me, I shall want a pair o' hoops. They was all the style in 'Frisco when we went through there two year' ago las' summer 'n' I've allus wanted a pair ever sense. I've allus said as they was elegant, ye know I have, Mariar.”

“Yes,” was the absent reply.

“'N' now 't' we've got a home o' our own 'n' livin' in lux'ry, I don't see why I can't have 'em. They'd make a lady o' me, as I orter be. I ain't had nothin' decent sense I was a Swipes, 'n' seems to me it's 'bout time to begin. I don't see what I've done to go round lookin' like I do. I'm sure I never done nothin' 'n' don't intend to.”

“Mebbe dad 'll git ye a pair when he finds work,” said Maria, in the same absent way.

“I'll never git 'em at all if I wait fer *him*,” said the moist woman with a sigh of ostentatious renunciation. “I've ast 'em time 'n' agin fer 'em, 'n' ye know 's well 's I do 't he never has money 'nough to buy proper grub fer the family, let alone hoops 'n' lux'ries. Two year I've been at 'im constant, 'n' no hoops yit nor like to be. Oh, well, I reckon I can give 'em up, same's I've had to everything else all my life long, though there's them about 'ere as own gold mines 'n' could make me a present o' 'em 'n' never feel it if they 'd a mind. But I don't complain. 'Tain't in nater fer me to git what I want. Though I never could see why.” And she settled back

as only a woman can to whom the longing for finery has brought a realization of the barrenness of time and circumstance.

“Mebbe I could have a pair sent up fer ye by the nex’ stage,” said Billy, beginning to see the drift of the moist woman’s remarks. “Would it suit ye to take ’em as a present from me? I’m sure I’d be joyful.”

The old woman disposed of—Billy would have been willing to purchase her silence at this moment with unlimited car-loads of crinolines—he turned once more to Maria. Had he said anything to annoy her? He could not think of anything. And yet at the moment of Mrs. Pugsley’s interruption a new mood had unmistakably entered into her look and tone. He longed to understand her,—he was certain he could if he had but half a chance,—her likes and dislikes were a study for which he felt he had an especial genius. It was with a sense of hurry lest she should say something to increase his bewilderment that he asked :

“Have I done anything out o’ the way, Mariar?” His voice shook in spite of him. “I didn’t mean it, on my word—”

She opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“*You* done anything?” she asked, and he felt a revival of self-confidence in her frank tone. “Why, no, what put that into yer head?”

“Suthin’ ye said ’bout yer gownd, I reckon. But, no matter. It’s all right now. I’m sure it don’t look dirty at all. Ye look—beautiful.”

He was smiling, but he uttered the word earnestly, with a palpitating eagerness. For an instant he regretted it, dreading that it should offend her; then he would not have recalled it if he could. He had told her that he admired her, and she must see that he was greatly in earnest.

She did not seem offended. She only laughed again—they both laughed a great deal, Billy thought—but this time her laughter was not mirthful. He did not like the sound of it; it made him feel for the first time in his life that it is a disadvantage to live in ignorance of the mental processes of one's neighbors.

“Oh, I don't mean *you*,” she said. She looked restless and discontented with herself, impressing him with the idea that she was trying to conceal something. The flush on her forehead deepened and she commenced plaiting her old gown between her fingers. “I meant other folks. All men ain't like *you*, ye know. All men ain't got yer kind heart 'n' friendly ways.”

He could have thrown himself at her feet then and there. He leaned forward with a great yearning, straining toward the discovery of some further response to his love, but she did not look at him, she did not seem to be thinking of him at all. Her eyes were employed with her hands as if under a doom to plait and unplait her soiled gown a given number of times a minute.

He drew back as if she had openly repulsed his tenderness, yet quivering with a desire to pour out his heart to her. His pulses fluttered noisily; it was on the tip of his tongue to tell her then and there of his hope that she would care for him, that she would let him care for her always; but her strange manner held him back. She seemed all at once so nervous, so irritable; what reaction from his conduct could have made her so? He could not understand it, and yet with the delusion of a generous nature he commenced to explain her mood to her advantage. Probably she had divined his feelings and was annoyed at the immoderate speed of his love-making, most likely that was it; but that ought to make her conscious of his presence rather than forgetful of it, as she seemed to be. Well, perhaps he was not capable of understand-

ing her so readily as he had supposed. All he could make of the matter was that women are strange.

She had stopped plaiting her gown now and was sitting with her hands loosely clasped but with the air of one who waits uneasily. Then another change passed over her. She straightened herself in her chair, as if bracing for a physical effort, while her eyes met his in defiance of his opinion of what she intended to say. Her cheeks and forehead burned, and while her brows frowned, her lips framed themselves in a tremulous smile which contradicted the carelessness with which she tried to speak.

Billy looked at her in wonder. This was not the Maria of five minutes before. She saw his surprise as a sick man may notice a look of alarm on his attendant's face, but ignored its significance and concentrated her thoughts as for a mental spring.

"Who is the man that talked with you out there by the gate yesterday?"

She leaned toward him, clutching her hands together and fixing her eyes upon his face a little below his returning gaze.

"That?" answered Billy, surprised anew. "Why, that was Jim Hulse. I thought I told ye."

She shook herself impatiently. She was not in a mood to be misunderstood.

"I don't mean his name. I knowed that. Can't ye understan' what I want?" With all her impatience she tried to speak as if making a casual inquiry. "I mean, what's he like?"

"Ye saw him, didn't ye?" answered Billy. "Can't ye jedge fer yerself?"

She shook herself again.

"No, what's he like?" Her voice rang high and hard.

"I d' know hardly what he *is* like," replied Billy, shrink-

ing slightly from her excited looks. "He's a mighty queer man. That's all I know."

"Ye said he read books."

"Yes."

"Ye've seen 'im a-doin' it?"

"Many a time. Books with queer letters in 'em."

"What else?"

"What else does he read, d'ye mean?"

"Oh, *can't* ye understan'?" she cried, angrily. And then in a voice of under-toned incisiveness, "I wish 't *I* could read books. Books like that."

She unclasped her hands with a quick wrench and folded her arms tightly across her bosom.

"Oh, I can read," she cried, meeting Billy's eyes for the first time. But she looked away again as she went on. "Not good, though. Not the way I'd like to. Not the way *he* reads."

"Well, I never took much stock in learnin', nohow," remarked Billy.

"Nor I!" she answered with a shrill laugh. She tossed her head and drew her arms closer together across her bosom. "Other folks does though. *He* does."

"'Tain't necessary fer a miner," Billy said, his voice thickening in spite of him. "Jim Hulse ain't no happier fer it. Nor no better off."

She did not seem to hear him.

"Ye said he'd murdered some one, wunst. I believe it. He could do it with his eyes. He could do anything with them eyes o' his. They burnt into me. I feel 'em yit."

"He aint got a good repytation, I know that." Billy uttered the words with a secret satisfaction of which he was more than half ashamed. "But they ain't no proof o' anything wrong with 'im. He ain't done nothin' out o' the way sence he come 'ere. It's only what folks says."

“More shame to ’em !” exclaimed Maria with sudden heat, unfolding her arms and facing him with the look of a champion. But something in his glance must have confused her for she dropped her eyes and commenced plaiting her gown again. “I only meant ’t folks ’d better be ’tendin’ to their own bizness. It’s the least they can do.”

She did not look at him for some time, and when she did it was as if shrinking from what he might think of her.

“What makes ye look ’n’ talk like that ’bout ’im ?” cried Billy, urged to expression by a twinge of honest jealousy. “What’s Jim Hulse ’n’ his murders to *you* ? If ye’re int’rested in ’im——”

She burst into a shrill scream of laughter. Mrs. Pugsley opened her eyes and uttered a faint protest which Maria did not hear.

“Me int’rested in ’im ?” she cried, still laughing in that exaggerated, hysterical way. “Well, if that ain’t good ! Me int’rested in that air feller ? As well ask if he’s int’rested in me ! Oh, Lord, I shall die a-laughin’, I know I shall !”

At this moment Mr. Pugsley came in from a successful tour among the saloons, and the conversation took a more general turn. When Billy rose to go Maria accompanied him out upon the porch, inviting him to come again and often. Her usual manner had returned and nothing could be more genuine than the frank cordiality of her looks and words.

“Ye’re the only feller here ’t I know or am likely to know,” she said. “So ye mustn’t go back on me. I don’t like fellers, gen’rally. But you seem jes’ like a brother. I’ll have my other dress washed ’n’ ironed by to-morrer, ’n’ then I’ll look better, mebbe. Ye’d better call aroun ’n’ see.”

There was no mistaking her friendliness. She *did* care for him.

"Ye allus look well 'nough for me," he replied, gallantly.

And he went away happy in spite of his bewilderment, though half convinced all the time that his recent doubt would produce a certain result on his future lot. But it was impossible to be jealous of Jim Hulse. Jim hated women, and Billy remembered the fact as an item in his own favor.

"That air young feller," said Ephraim, regarding Billy's retreating figure with the bleared eye of tipsy affection, "w'y—I'd like to be that air young feller's daddy, I would. I—w'y—I love that air feller a'ready like he was my own son. 'Markable chap he mus' be to work on me so quick 'n' hard—eh, Mariar? He's got a claim up 'ere 't promises millions. I've jes' been hearin' 'bout it down to Boozey's. Everybody's talkin' 'bout it. He's the mos' successful miner o' the age, Mariar!"

"I'm glad o' it," was her quiet answer. "He's a good feller, Billy is, 'n' I like 'im. I think he'll make good use o' his money. He deserves to git rich, if anybody does."

And she would say no more.

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM her infancy Maria Pugsley had been imbued with the republican sentiment,—a substitute for religion among people of her class,—that she was as good as anybody and didn't propose to be looked down upon, an opinion which resulted in an incalculable sequence of ideas, as republican sentiments sometimes do. For having progressed so far as to believe herself as good as anybody, she felt in duty bound to back her equality by a willingness to fight for it; after which there followed a development from the negative resolution not to be looked down upon to the positive conviction that in her ability to take care of herself she was superior to other people and therefore ought to be looked up to; which was followed in turn by a disposition to fight for her superiority, should it be called in question. Unconscious of any standard of excellence except personal independence,—she never dreamed that her kind-heartedness and love of justice were excellent qualities,—she clattered about in her little world as proud of the noise she made as a small boy in large boots. Once her father, in a casual fit of remonstrance, told her that she was always too full of herself to walk easy, and she retorted that if there was as much of him as there was of her, his wretched little body couldn't bear the strain five minutes, but would split open like a potato in hot ashes. Her opinion of herself was extraordinary, working out a half-pitying contempt for all pleasures that were not of her kind, and for all employments of which she was ignorant; she screamed and yelled and thought herself very remarkable indeed, never imagining that she was on a level with the savage who sends his challenging war-cry through his small expanse

of forest. It is natural to take pride in one's supremacy, though it be only a supremacy of bad dreams ; and the points on which Maria prided herself were her high temper and her strong will. She was so accustomed to exert an absolute authority at home that her confidence in her ability to rule the world at large,—by which is always meant one's little circle of acquaintances,—had grown to astonishing proportions, together with a disposition to exact the admiration of her associates for her masculine force of character.

It puzzled her considerably that she should all at once be overcome by a sort of fierce jealousy of this Hulse's power to "read books" ; she had never believed very seriously in the enjoyments of learning—certainly she had never discovered much enjoyment in trying to read, it was such a bother to spell through the words ; but it nettled her to know that this man could do something which she could not. She could account for her envy only on the grounds that she was getting weak-minded, and she assured herself repeatedly in her moments of solitary meditation, that she must "brace up." It was an evidence of weak-mindedness that she hated him as she did, for she was certain that her feeling for him was nothing short of hatred ; if she were her old independent self, his behavior and accomplishments would be nothing to her one way or the other ; he could read books and look superior till he dropped into his grave, for all she would care. But as long as she was not quite herself—she wondered whether she was in her dotage !—why, the thing to do was to pull herself together and be as much like herself as possible.

Whenever she thought of Hulse's manner on that day at the gate, she was filled with such rebellion as a high-mettled horse feels against the hand that would force the bit between its teeth and lead it away. Not that he had

made any attempt to subdue her, or was likely to do so ; she would like to catch him at it ; it was the secret assurance she had that if he did attempt such a thing, he would succeed,—at least to the extent of making her feel small and weak. The look of the man left among her vagrant ideas a sense of power that worried and exasperated her. The thought of what he might do with her made her feel as if floating helplessly in strong infinite waters ; he seemed a keen elemental force, capable of working a will resistlessly and pitilessly—an electric flash with a consciousness. He thrilled her with a sort of suspense, as if he were that mysterious interval between a cause and its effect. Maria could have expressed nothing of this, but she had a vivid longing to follow him, to watch the outcome of such electric intensity, to discover on what he expended his conserved force and fire. It was more than woman's curiosity with her ; it was a dreadful fatality. She could not free herself from the thought of him. He made night hideous by visiting her dreams. Once she dreamed that she was wandering alone in a desert, and the moon was shining with ghostly steadiness in a black sky ; and as she walked she stumbled upon the trunkless, bloody head of a man, and bending down saw, by the wan light, Hulse's eyes glaring up at her with vacant, burning pertinacity.

And, indeed, Hulse might have puzzled and haunted one more accustomed to psychic wonders than Maria. His movements contradicted his eyes, for his demeanor was quiet, even subdued ; the lava-heat was all within, but thus more terrible because its ebullitions could not be calculated on. What was known of the daily habits of his life tightened the grasp which his appearance took on the imagination. He lived alone, spoke little to those he met, and apparently promised as little to himself as to others. He acknowledged no claims and took no notice

of other souls except at a distance. Yet it was plain he felt no pride in maintaining this spiritual solitude, and found no compensation in anything for the hopelessness of living. He had worn his life to a rag which he did not throw away because the effort was too much trouble. If you had an imagination, you would picture him with the traits of a Druid priest,—problematic qualities suggesting a divine calling degraded by infernal practices ; he was like one who has talked with God face to face and afterward fallen to an abject, inglorious destiny.

Maria longed to show her contempt for him, to prove that she was not so despicable as she had appeared that day. She longed for an opportunity to convince him that she was not to be consigned unresistingly to a corner by any lordly opinion of his. Her pride in her superior strength of character was of too substantial a growth to shrink at once and die out at an adverse breath of criticism ; but in spite of assuring herself to the contrary, that pride was undergoing important modifications. It had received a shock which deadened it a little,—just enough to make it want to appear livelier than ever. The change was not in her nature, but in the conditions of her nature ; she felt it as subtly and with such dread as she would have felt the first doubt of her sanity. She told herself over and over that she cared nothing for what Hulse thought of her, but in her soul she realized that her resistance to his estimate was only a childish makeshift, a puerile evasion of the bitter truth that she must, soon or late, make some sort of open confession of his mastery. But she would make no confession yet. She had failed to assert herself as she ought to have done when Hulse stood talking with Billy at the gate. No matter. There were other days coming, she told herself angrily ; it was not too late yet. Failure acts either as an anodyne or a stimulant,—it always acted as the latter on Maria. She worked herself into a great

passion imagining what she would say to him the next time she met him. She hated herself when she remembered the moment of relenting in which she almost believed he had not seen her that day. He had seen her; she was sure of it now,—he had seen her as he saw the gate-post and the broken wheelbarrow out by the fence, settling her value in the scale of things with one glance of his all-comprehending eyes. The gall of his indifference left a bitter flavor in her thoughts always. Though she knew next to nothing of the ways of civilization, she divined instinctively that his indifference resulted from unconsciously employing the standards of polite society for measuring a barbarian,—a process which consigned her at once to a position at the very bottom of the social stratum. He employed the standard *unconsciously*; therein consisted the prime cause of Maria's resentment,—he did not know that he had passed judgment on her at all. She would not have been so angry had he made her feel his power by a direct effort of his will; she could have screamed defiance at him then and hooted his opinion out of existence; besides, a conscious effort on his part would have implied certain strong qualities of her own to call forth such effort. But this indifference was unbearable. Well! she promised that she would show him yet that she was a very positive existence of bone, muscle and nerve which no pre-judgment of his could metamorphose into a nonentity. She dramatized herself standing before him in strong self-assertion, wagging her head and overwhelming him with a torrent of loud-mouthed scorn. She went about her work with contracted brows, studying contemptuous things to say to him. Anarchy in time makes laws for itself, and after a little Maria settled into comparative quiet under the soothing assurance that when she met Hulse again, she would be ready for him. She did not speculate on what her sensations after the battle might be.

CHAPTER XVII.

ONE afternoon Mrs. Pugsley and her two daughters were sitting in the room that faced the river. They had yielded to the flaccid silence which fell upon them habitually when left for a considerable time together. Maud Eliza was nursing her knee with vacant industry, meanwhile swaying her body back and forth and keeping her eyes fastened upon a knot-hole in the floor as if that phenomenon were an immediate and all-absorbing object of study. Maria was darning stockings and the moist woman lay quite still on her blankets under one of the windows, enjoying that irresponsible blank comfort which is a habit with people whose lives have been rendered shapeless by idleness. Mrs. Pugsley was more comfortable in Havilah than she had been for years before, and it may be said to her credit that she was more cheerful, in a manner too; but her manner was peculiar and she would still have produced on susceptible strangers the effect of long continued rainy weather. She still had spells of purposeless weeping in which she took pains to inform her family that she was not complaining of her lot; and she admonished her daughters daily to consider how happily she was married and to go and do likewise. Once she became violently figurative and told them that "if they was to take a fine-tooth comb 'n' scratch the world over with it, they couldn't find 'nother man like her Ephraim," and presently she fell to commiserating herself as "a no 'count critter as never had no joy nor comfort, 'n' the world allus trod on," Maria understood perfectly that her mother was as happy as it was in her nature to be, and always spoke to her

cheerfully. She was very patient with her mother. She had located her mother's odd tastes very accurately and knew just where to put her finger on them. We are all little earths marked over with meridians and parallels on which our peculiarities are easily located.

In her long years of nomadic improvidence Mrs. Pugsley had almost forgotten to dream of the luxury of a home, and now that she had all at once stumbled into one which answered her ideal requirements, it is probable that, in spite of her frequent low spirits, no Roman voluptuary ever felt more supremely contented, stretched full length under a green arbutus, quaffing wine. The dignity of living under a roof caused her at times to assume an air of sentimental benignity such as familiarity with luxury may be supposed to produce. And frequently she would sit up among her blankets with a feeble assumption of the duties of motherhood and for a few moments give indiscriminate orders to everybody with the importance of a woman of exalted social standing who has many claims on her attention ; or she would be quite still for two or three hours with the introspective look of one who has gazed too long into the deep stream of life, and finally rouse herself to express a solemn opinion of the dinner or the weather.

Outside, the big valley seems conscious of its beauty in the spring's bridal garments. It is a flash of bright coloring, an outline of marvelous forms. The pines on the foothills are mixed indiscriminately with their shadows, the young cottonwoods rise like explosions of green spray. One of the nearer foothills is as smooth and round and softly-tinted as a woman's cheek. The river flows under the trees in the faint, tender sunshine which touches all shadowed water, but a little further on it flashes into light, eager to prove its power to unite heaven and earth in its clear current.

As you walk, your feet crush through worlds of violets and pale blue iris blossoms, till you can fancy you are walking in the sky. The sunshine affects you like Roman goblets of Massic wine. Birds, giddy with the sunshine, hang over the earth in an ecstasy of thanksgiving, going in and out of the blue sky at will. Here a crystal spring flashes among long grasses like a girl's bright eyes from beneath dishevelled hair. A distant dome gleams in the sun like a great pale emerald ; on the far mountains the pines are a faint growth of fungus ; the clouds are angels' wings, and everywhere, everywhere, throughout the length and breadth of the valley, are flowers, nothing but flowers, you think, like materialized sunbeams. It is Eden, planted by God's hand. You float on the slow, monotonous music of the river, which has the stately movement and rhythm of clouds. You are rejuvenated, illuminated, transfigured. The sweet growth which throbs through nature's rapid pulses becomes a part of your spiritual evolution, and you long to sing with reverent joy, like a child at play in the sunshine. God is love, and this life He has given us is the highest expression of that love !

From the two windows of the front room of the Pugsley cabin, a magnificent view of the valley and the mountains could be obtained. The window under which Mrs. Pugsley lay looked toward the near foothills where the sun-touched pines rose from the shadows like smoke from unseen chimneys. The afternoon was well advanced, yet the mist still hung on one rounded summit there and stirred in the wind as lightly as a layer of thistle-down. The long, warm sunbeams made the air palpitate with the sweet, vivid heat of spring ; the sky was blue, with here and there a light pellucid ripple of cirrus cloud ; a flock of white doves circled over the cottonwoods by the river, beating upward with wings whose shadows were like light. On the far edge of the valley the mountains loomed

black above their talus of white cloud ; higher up they turned to white again and clung to the sky like a purer growth of it. There is something in these high horizons which is indescribably sweet and tender, which accompanies, but is distinct from, the rugged force of mountain summits. It can be compared only to something spiritual and holy. It is the communion of old friendship, the full silence of long-reciprocated love. The sky and the mountains know and love each other ; they have lain face to face and heart to heart since the beginning of the world.

Maria liked the garrulous reserve of the river, and it was as an unbearable discord that she suddenly heard a singer in a saloon not far off lift up his voice and apostrophize Jenny to wait till the clouds roll by.

Mrs. Pugsley opened her eyes and listened. She had nothing to do,—nothing even to think, one might add,—and was disposed to yield to the persuasion of lyric influences.

“What a purty voice that air feller’s got,” she remarked with sentiment. “The tune’s rather too much like the oppery, though, ’n’ I never went much on them oppery tunes. But it’s reel sweet, his voice is. It ’minds me o’ the times the fellers used to come a-serenadin’ o’ me up to the Bar.”

Maria shrugged her shoulders and went on darning.

“Them was gay times, gay times,” continued the moist woman in the pattering, gosling-like voice she had lately assumed when recurring to the days of her youth. “How the fellers used to come a-turkeyin’ aroun’ after me in them days ! ’N’ how we used to set aroun’ on the door-steps, laffin’ ’n’ singin till midnight ’n’ past ! ’N’ oh, the fun we had,—folks d’ know how to have fun nowheres but to Swipes’s Bar, seems to me.”

The song continued.

“Why don’t ye jine in ’n’ sing along o’ ’im, Maria ?

'N' Maud Elizy, too? *I* would myself if didn't have sech a rippin' pain in my side. If they's anything I like to hear 'n' reely enjoy 'n' feel good over, it's a man 'n' woman singin' together. Jine in—jine in—ye can sing!"

"Oh, yes, I can sing if ye'll git a crow 'n' a bull-frog to help me," said Maria.

"Maud Elizy 'll help ye," said the provident mother. "Won't ye, Maud Elizy?"

"Thankee, *I* ain't no crow nor bull-frog," responded that lively damsel with unexpected acuteness. "'N' I don't 'pose to be used fer one!"

"Well, go on 'n' try it, anyhow, Maria. Ye know them words,—I've heerd ye sing 'em. I've been longin' fer a coon's age fer some music. Strike in 'n' mebbe he'll sing it over again with ye!"

"*I* sing?" cried Maria with a touch of impatience. "Ye know's well's I do't if I was to sing fer sour beans I couldn't git a smell!"

"I'd like to hear ye, I've been longin' fer music," sighed Mrs. Pugsley in a manner which showed that her aspirations for the unattainable were mounting in proportion as her material wants were supplied. Then she added in one of her desultory moods of maternal instruction. "But I won't urge ye. 'Tain't no use to urge folks—I've noticed that. 'N' I've tried to teach my young 'uns the same idee. 'Tain't in human nater, Maria, to want to be urged; Maud Elizy, remember that." And she adjusted herself on the blankets with the air of a tireless student of humanity who has imparted the results of long experience.

Having disposed of the music and delivered herself of this sage advice, she turned to other subjects. Hers was a facile mind in which ideas glided easily past each other, like the molecules of a liquid.

"It's very comf'table here, Mariar," she remarked, with a consciousness of her new and advantageous position in

society. "Leastways it would be, if I could fergit my side. I hain't had so much to be thankful fer sence Dad run under, up there to the Bar. 'Tain't no more 'n I deserve, though, after all I've gone through 'n' put up with. I've earned it, I can say that, honest 'nough. I never done nothin' not to have things. 'T wa'n't my fault 't we didn't show off more in the world. O' late years I'd sort o' give up all hopes o' ever 'mountin' to anything, though I used to calc'late on it when we was fust married. This 'ere life in a house o' our own is jes' 'bout what I reckoned it 'ud be—'tain't nothin' but what I was used to in my thoughts." And she sighed with a half-realization of the fact that an attained ambition is nothing more than a repetition of memories.

"'Tain't our house, nohow," put in Maria. "It's Billy's,—we ain't got no call to speak o' it like it b'longed to us."

"Oh, well, it's all the same," was the old woman's answer. "He'll be in the fam'ly 'fore long hisself. Don't ye see he's gone on ye, Mariar—clean gone? 'N' o' course ye'll git 'im if ye can. Ephraim says his prospecks is way-up."

Maria did not answer, but she looked as if she considered herself capable of deciding that matter for herself.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALL at once Maud Eliza commenced tittering.

“He’ll make a purty addition onto the fam’ly, Billy Bling will,” she said. “Don’t ye reckon so, Mariar?”

“I reckon he looks ’s well ’s what we do,” replied Maria, jerking her big needle through the stocking she was darning. “We don’t none o’ us han’sim much, I take it.”

Maud Eliza held her nose between her thumb and forefinger and then “let go” with a tremendous snort.

“Oh, yes,” she cried, gurgling and strangling in her hilarity, “he’ll make a monstrous purty addition, *he* will. Scrubby red moustaches is a addition onto any fam’ly. The Pugsleys’ll be proud, *they* will!”

“Well, they orter,” said Maria, briefly.

“Oh, they will!” repeated Maud Eliza. She swayed back and forth on the candle-box which she had turned on end for a seat, and then in another sudden explosive snort lost her balance and rolled over upon the floor, still tittering uninterruptedly.

“Well, if ye ain’t a bird!” said Maria, ironically. “Ye never missed a note, I vow!”

Maud Eliza collected herself and sat up on the floor to secure herself from any further treachery on the part of gravity.

“Well, when’s the weddin’ goin’ to be?” she asked as soon as she could stop giggling sufficiently to speak.

“Ask me no questions ’n’ I’ll tell ye no lies,” replied Maria. “Ye won’t have no finger in *that* pie, I can tell ye,” she added, positively.

"I'll bet ye'll be two awful clinks when ye wunst git reg'larly spoony on each other," said Maud Eliza with another series of titters.

"Oh, *you* know all 'bout that," retorted her sister.

"Yes," admitted Maud Eliza, with an engaging snort, "I've got that down fine. I reckon," she supplemented with some pride, "I know how to spoon 's well 's any gal in Californy."

"When Mariar gits married," put in Mrs. Pugsley, "she can do jes' what she likes. She can turn Billy round 'n' round 'er finger, that's plain 'nough. 'N' that 'll suit 'er."

"Oh, yes," answered Maria, "that'll suit me. They ain't nothin' I like to do 's well 's to do what I like."

"I hope ye'll be a good wife," continued the moist woman, falling into another didactic maternal mood. "I'm sure ye've had examples in me. 'N' they ain't no use bein' otherways. It's the least a wooman can do."

"Well, I d' know," answered Maria, biting off her yarn and drawing another thread through her needle. "*I* ain't got no wish to make myself so pious 's to feel the wings a-sproutin' on my shoulders—not in *this* world. That ain't the kind o' hollyhock I am."

"Billy's a nice feller," remarked Mrs. Pugsley.

"Yes, he's a nice feller. I wonder 't he stays 'ere in Havilah 'mongst all these scrubs. He's too good to 'sociate with 'em."

"He'll prob'ly build 'nother house in camp 'n' let us stay in this 'un. 'Tain't no more 'n fair't he should, after all 't I've gone through. Yer pa 'n' Maud Elizy 'n' me can come over 'n' stay with ye two-three weeks to a time. It 'ud be great times to have two houses like that to wunst 'n' go from one to t'other 'n' stay 's long 's ye wanted to."

The women were silent for a little while, Maud Eliza swaying herself back and forth on the floor with her eyes

fixed once more upon the knot-hole. Maria had made up her mind not to get angry at the turn conversation had taken, no matter what was said.

Pausing for a moment in her work, her eyes fell upon the rose-vine outside the window.

"How putty them roses is!" she says. "The smell o' em sorter goes through 'n' through me on a day like this."

"What roses?" asked Mrs. Pugsley, languidly. "Oh, ye mean them things out o' the winder."

"Yes, Billy fastened 'em up, ye know, a day or two after we got 'ere."

"Billy, Billy, Billy!" mimicked Maud Eliza. "It's nothin' but Billy from daylight to dark, till sometime I think we're livin' with a lot o' goats 'n' ye're callin' one o' 'em. If my stummick wa'n't strong, I'm sure I couldn't stan' it." She ended with her customary snort.

Mrs. Pugsley shook her head reprovingly.

"Ye mustn't make fun o' 'er, Maud Elizy," she said in admonitory tones. "Ye d'know how soon ye'll git gone on some feller yerself, 'n' then ye wouldn't like to have folks a-worryin' *you*. Cert'nly Mariar has a right to speak o' Billy 'n' the roses. It's only proper 's long's he helped 'er fix the vine."

"If they should be a dance or anything the roses 'ud be nice to wear in my hair," said Maud Eliza meditatively.

Mrs. Pugsley's vaporous features were illuminated by a ray of satisfaction.

"D'ye hear that, Mariar!" she said. "That's jes' the way I used to feel when I was a gal. Maud Elizy's Swipes all over!"

"Yes, she's Swipes all over," admitted Maria, grimly.

There was another silence of a few moments, broken only by the noise of the river and the whirr of the doves returning over the cottonwoods.

"I had 'nother one o' my dreams las' night," the moist

woman finally said, writhing on her blankets and adjusting her skirts. (This process of adjustment was by no means a simple one, as the crinoline promised by Billy had become an accomplished fact). "They's suthin goin' to happen. I allus know they's troubles a-brewin' when I commence to dream."

"What was it 'bout?" asked Maria.

"W'y, it was 'bout Billy. Talkin' 'bout 'm was what brought it into my mind. I thought we was all o' us 'ere in this room, you 'n' me 'n' Maud Elizy 'n' yer pa, 'n' ye was gittin' dinner 'n' the rest o' us was settin' 'round the way we allus be. 'N' says I, '*What* be we a-goin' to have fer dinner?' perfectly natral, as ye may say. 'N', says you, 'Greens.' 'Greens?' says I, 's joyful 's could be, fer I allus dearly loved greens from way-back. 'Mariar,' says I, 'I'll cook the greens.' 'N' I got up off'n my blankets 'n' says, 'We'll bile 'em with that air ham-bone what's hangin' up in the woodshed.' 'No,' says you, 'We'll save that till nex' time. I've got suthin better to cook 'em with to-day.' 'N' I looked into the kittle 't was simmerin' away on the stove, 'n' there was Billy Bling in there, a-bilin' 'n' a-stewin'; 'n' every minute or two his face 'ud come up to the top 'n' look at us reproachful, while we was starin' into the kittle, 'n' then sink again. 'N' ye give a sort o' screech 'n' says, 'Oh, I didn't think he'd look like that or I wouldn't a-done it! Let's put in more greens so 's to cover 'm up.' 'N' we put the greens in, but it didn't do no good. Every minute or two the bubblin' water 'ud fetch 'is face to the top, 'n' he'd stare at us in that orfle gashly way 'n' then go under agin'. 'N' by 'm by I woke up. I d' know what it means, but it's suthin'. I never knowed myself to dream like that fer nothin'."

Maria shuddered.

"I don't b'lieve in dreams," she said.

"Well, I do," declared the moist woman. Her thoughts,

which were evidently in a liquid state, flowed readily into any channel that was made for them, and she rambled on in an inconsequent way. "That 'minds me to ask what 'twas't Billy sent over to-day in that air brown paper package. D' I hear ye say chicken?"

"Yes—'n' apples for pies."

"We'll have 'em for dinner to-morrer, won't we?"

"Yes, I'm goin' to ask Billy to come down 'n' eat with us if I see him 'fore then. If he furnishes the grub, he orter help eat it."

The chicken was a sweet smell in Mrs. Pugsley's nostrils.

"I like the gizzard best," said she. "I allus took the gizzard when we had chicken up there to the Bar. Dad used to tell me it was the same with him back in Arkansas when he was young. That must be a great country back there, Mariar. Ye orter a-heerd dad tell 'bout it. He'd go on by the hour, jes's interestin'. I've allus felt bad 't I wan't borned there. It's a splendid country, everything right to a feller's hand, 'n' folks so sociable like." She thought of these days with something of the regretful envy with which the later Romans regarded their ancestors under Augustus. "If we was ever to git able to 'ford it, I'd like to go back there 'n' see things. Mebby Billy 'll whack up, by'm by—he'll be sure to have money 'nough fer anything, 'n I don't reckon he'll be stingy. Who's that comin' into the gate?"

Maria glanced out of the window.

"Good Lord, it's that Hulse!" she said faintly.

"The feller 't his hosses pulled us out o' the mud that day?—the one that sorter don't look to hum in hisself?" asked Mrs. Pugsley in her vaporous way. "Well, you go to the door—but wait till I fix myself." She sat up on her blankets, adjusted her gown carefully, taking care that the crinoline should show through her thin calico

skirt; smoothed her hair after moistening her palm with her tongue, and put on an expression as if sitting to an artist.

At first something like a sickness came over Maria,—a chill feeling of expansion, as if she were passing into solution; then her heart gave a great leap and her strength came back. She became conscious of a stage of aggregation in the process of thinking. The slight which Hulse had put upon her, her longings for retaliation heaped themselves up in her; she was not afraid of him now—she longed to meet him. Her anger rose with a resistless swell—she felt as if she were crouching for a spring that would destroy him. She laid her work down on the floor by the box on which she was seated, and stuck her darning-needle firmly into the window ledge; then she rose and squared herself toward the door with her hands on her hips.

She was ready for him.

CHAPTER XIX.

As Hulse came up to the Pugsley cabin, he did not raise his eyes until he stood on the veranda. He might have told Maria his errand—for he had come on an errand—and gone away as ignorant of her existence as before, had he not noticed her aggressive attitude and the warlike expression of her face.

He saw before him a heavy-footed, broad-shouldered, strong-bodied young woman with an honest, fierce face, black hair and clear eyes of uncertain color, in which there was more than a hint of the freedom of wild things;—a woman with a keen, incisive face and a half-mannish beauty, asserting in every limb and feature her conscious ability to take care of herself.

His look of casual survey intensified into a gaze of slow scrutiny, into which in turn gradually grew an element of curiosity,—nothing indicative of close observation, however,—only a little of the awakening interest one is forced to feel in indifferent objects which press too closely to be passed unobserved. His marvellous eyes,—they seemed never to have looked tenderly into other eyes,—regarded her with a slight momentary wonder, but his notice of her implied nothing further than an involuntary discrimination between herself and one of an inferior race, being hardly more personal than a brief mood for ethnographic study, intended possibly to correct a mistaken meaning. A very superficial observation must have assured Hulse, however, of the present meaning of Maria Pugsley. For at that moment she was dominated by an anger which was almost a thirst for slaughter; the look of the man

before he uttered a word produced on her the effect which the sound of battle has on an old war-horse.

She felt herself turning pale. Her eyes were hot, her lips tremulous. She burst all at once into angry speech, resolved not to undergo the bitterness of forestallment if insults were to be uttered or contemptuous treatment endured.

"We-ell!" she cried, breaking the monosyllable in two and flinging the pieces into his face. "Who be *you*?"

He leaned his arm leisurely against the door-post and looked down at her—she would not have believed that he was so tall—as if he were watching the movements of some curious insect.

"Is Bling here?"

She had never heard his voice distinctly before, and it thrilled her. It had an indescribable vibrant power: it was like nervous force made audible. But she would not yield to its influence. She stiffened her muscles as if at the touch of a whip.

"We-ell!" she cried in a harsh voice, like the clatter of fire-irons. "If ye stan' there with yer fingers in yer mouth till *I* tell ye where Bling is, they'll grow there!"

Then it occurred to her that Hulse was not standing with his fingers in his mouth and that her remark must have sounded very flat and foolish—in short, very like a woman. She did not want to appear like a woman, but very manly and all-subduing. She wished she could think of some of the fine things she had planned to say to him. But only one came into her head, and that was the very poorest of her composing.

"Some folks is mighty satisfied with theirselves," she cried sarcastically. "They ain't nothin' so satisfactory's self-satisfaction, 'n' a man can't git that only at the price o' ignorance."

Somehow that did not seem quite to suit the occasion,

either—it sounded disconnected and premeditated. What if he should guess the truth that she considered him of sufficient importance to prepare speeches for him beforehand? She was experiencing the humiliation of discovering that she was capable of being weak where she intended to be strong, and that altogether she was hovering dangerously close to the verge of the commonplace. She determined to break loose from her preconceived idea of herself and let her rage carry her whithersoever it would. That would be the best way. She pulled herself together and commenced bravely.

“So ye want Bling, do ye?” she cried, standing very straight and trying to look down at him. “We-ell! Won’t ye come in ’n’ set down ’n’ wait in the piler till I go out ’n’ hunt ’im up fer ye? Ye better, ’n’ hold yer breath till I do! What d’ ye take me fer, anyhow—a June-bug ’t ain’t ripe?”

“I don’t understand,” he said, looking at her with vague examination.

“I don’t chaw my cabbage twic’t,” she snapped. “Shakespeare don’t repeat ’n’ don’t ye fergit it. My ’pinion o’ *you* is ’t ye’re allus askin’ a heap more favers o’ folks ’n ye’re willin’ to let ’em ask o’ *you*. Ye try to work ’em—that’s where the bug lays with *you*. But ye won’t git me to repeat what I say, nor go a-sailin’ onto the street to hunt up folks fer ye, lemme tell ye that!”

That was not so strongly put as she had intended it to be, and she had a misgiving that indications of idiocy might be discoverable in her, as made manifest by exuberance of words and dearth of ideas. But she began again with desperate persistence.

“So ye wanted to see Bling, did ye? Ye did, huh? Bling, huh? Ye orter be learnt to call a gentleman *Mister*, ’n’ if I’d a-had the trainin’ o’ ye I’d a-seen ’t ye done it.

Bling, huh? Ye orter be took acrosst somebody's checked apron 'n' paddled—that's what!"

She was better satisfied with her effort this time. It must make him feel very small to be talked to like a little boy in that way.

But if he felt small he gave no signs of it. There was not a trace of emotion of any kind on his face as he asked:

"Then he isn't here?"

"Don't think," she cried, raising her voice and ignoring his question, "'t I want none o' yer friendship,—I'd scorn it if ye offered it. I ain't one o' the crawlin' kind, I ain't. Yer high-flyin' ways don't go down with me,—goin' aroun' with yer nose in the air a-sniffin' like ye was a puppy 'n' had a rat's nest under yer nose! Style? I reckon that's what ye call style, a-steppin' high 'n' lookin' down on folks. But if I had sech a bilious complexion's what *you've* got, I'd go 'n' git my liver half-soled, 'n' not be tryin' to put on airs. I won't have ye givin' *me* none o' yer dirt, lem'me tell ye!"

Hulse moved his hand a little way up the door-post, but made no sign of going away or otherwise altering his position.

"Do you know where he is?" he inquired in a louder voice, as if addressing a deaf person.

"Do I know where he is?" mimicked Maria. "I reckon he's where he b'longs, which is more 'n' some folks can say o' theirselves. Seems to me any parrotic, cheese-headed fool might a-seen he wan't 'ere a hour ago. Want to set down 'n' wait fer 'im? Reckon I can keep the room comf'table warm fer ye if ye do. Come in, come in, 'n' set down on the floor 'n' be frien'ly—I feel jes' like givin' ye a song 'n' dance the rest o' the afternoon. I won't mince matters. When I got anything to say, I jes' march up square-toed 'n' say it—that's me!"

A faint expression of amusement crept into Hulse's sombre face.

"You seem a very engaging young female," he remarked. "Dickens ought to have got hold of you."

"The dickens 's got a holt o' *you* a'ready," she retorted. "'N' I bet he's goin' to keep his grip, too!"

He bowed, and when he lifted his face she saw a look there which she would not have believed possible on his tragic features. He was smiling. She followed him out upon the veranda as he passed down the steps.

"If I was you," she shrieked, wagging her head as she had often pictured herself doing, and wishing that he would turn so as to see how scornful she looked, "If I was you I'd take to stump-speakin' fer the nex' 'lection. If ye'd jes' turn up yer mug 'n' empty that air smile out onto the public, ye could do anything with 'em ye liked." She returned to the door and called back to her mother, loud enough for him to hear, "Wa'n't that fun, though, ma? Didn't I give it to 'im? D'ye reckon I'm goin' to have any sech lookin' cubs 's he is a-comin' 'ere 'n' warmin' their coat-tails at *my* fire? Oh, Lor', I'm 's happy 's ole boots!" And she commenced to sing as loud as she could scream :

"The grasshopper sat on the railroad track,
Sing polly-wolly-doodle all the day!
And he picked his teeth with a carpet tack,
Sing polly-wolly-doodle all the day!
Farewell, farewell, farewell my fairy fay,
I'm going home to see my Susiannah,
Sing polly-wolly-doodle all the day!"

Then she went into the house abruptly and took up her darning, but laid it down again without taking a stitch. Her hands trembled so that she could not control them. She could do nothing but laugh—she was afraid she was going to cry and she would rather have died.

“Well, ye did give it to ’im,” remarked Mrs. Pugsley, who had been looking on with a neutral expression.

“Great sufferin’!” put in Maud Eliza. “What a peelin’ ye did give ’im! It made my hair pull to hear ye!”

“Didn’t I give it to ’im?” cried Maria with wild laughter. “Oh, ma, ma, ain’t I a pill?”

CHAPTER XX.

It was all Maria could do to keep back the tears. She was afraid they would burst forth in spite of her and make her appear weak and womanish when she most desired to appear strong and manly. To face her mother and sister and listen to their comments on the affair,—mostly of an admiring nature, it is true, but in Mrs. Pugsley's case flavored with a doubt as to the propriety of such conduct in a girl whose mother had been a Swipes of Swipes's Bar,—was a continuation of torment not long to be borne. She must get away at once and hide where she could let the tears come unhindered. She was just going to rush out into the woodshed as the most convenient place of refuge, when she was arrested by the sound of voices in that direction. There was no escape. It was Billy and her father. She did not dare to run away through the front door for they would be sure to see her and call her back. She must stay and face it through.

“Lord help me!” she prayed to herself, hysterically. “What'll I do—what'll I do?”

With an effort which was like a wrench to strained and bruised muscles she forced herself to be calm and look toward them as they entered.

“Ye orter a-been 'ere!” screeched Maud Eliza, still agitated by the conflict. “Mariar was that mad she could a-bit a ten-penny nail in two!”

“What was it 'bout?” asked Ephraim with a grin.

“It was that Hulse,” cried Maria, laughing very loudly while her eyes looked swollen and dry.

“Hulse?” echoed Billy, with a quick impulse of jealousy. “What was he doin' 'ere?”

"W'y," explained Maud Eliza, interrupting herself at every other word with excited titters, "he come a-inquirin' fer Bling, 'n' Mariar she got on 'er ear 'n' give 'im Hail Columby. Oh, my! but didn't she pepper 'im?"

"She made 'im quit his funny bizness, I bet," said Ephraim with admiration.

"I ain't sure 't was becomin', though," remarked Mrs. Pugsley. "I ain't sure 't *I'd* a-done it, nohow. It showed she was a gal o' sperrit, but I ain't sure 'twas becomin'. A gal may go too fur."

"But what was it all 'bout?" asked Billy. "What d' he do?"

"W'y," answered Maud Eliza with a hilarious strangle, "I couldn't see 't he was doin' nothin' wuss 'n' callin' ye Bling. 'N' Mariar didn't seem to like it. She made a p'int o' the handle—she wanted 'im to call ye Mister. She seems to want folks to look up to ye, *Mister* Bling!"

Everybody laughed at this, Maria louder than the others, But her laugh was not mirthful; one who listened carefully might have thought it appealing.

"Mariar's the devil's own," said Ephraim, approvingly.

Billy had never thought of resenting the abbreviation of his name, and that Maria should do so implied an interest in his dignity which was more than pleasing, and made him almost feel as if his value had hitherto been underrated. His heart began to beat rapidly, and he flushed all over his face and neck. Could she really have given Hulse a rating for such a trifle as that? Just because she imagined the strange man had been lacking in respect? It was too good to be true. He gave her a radiant look.

"So ye went fer 'im o' my 'count?" he asked.

"I wa'n't goin' to stan' none o' his airs," she replied, keeping her voice steady by an effort. "He can keep his distance from me 'less he wants suthin' he don't like."

"Ye got away with him, then, did ye?" inquired Billy.

"Ye bet she did, if she tried it," affirmed Ephraim. "It's 'most dangerous to be safe aroun' where Mariar is!"

"He ain't a bad feller," remarked Billy, generously. His jealousy was all gone now.

"Taffy on a shoestring!" cried Maria. "He's the nastiest, disagribblest man I ever see. 'N' now don't let's talk no more 'bout it. I want ye to come over to dinner to-morrer—we're goin' to have a hen fun'ral 'n want ye fer chief mourner."

"'N' apple pie," added Mrs. Pugsley, ambiguously.

"Not reg'lar pie," corrected Maud Eliza. "It's a concern to eat milk 'n' sugar on—way up." She nodded her head, smacked her lips and giggled. "Dad calls it apple-grunt."

Billy went away presently, and as soon as he was out of sight Maria hurried from the house and ran toward the river, then turned and followed the current down stream until she was hidden by the cottonwoods and underbrush which grew thickly along the bank. When she was certain that no one could see her, she seated herself on a fallen tree, close up to the water, and wept as only a woman can who has been denied the comfort of weeping when she most needed it. At first the sobs came thick and fast; they mastered her, they shook her like impatient, hostile hands; but gradually the violence of the outburst passed, and she wept those steady, painless tears which are the best relief of burdened minds, and which are "salt, and bitter, and good." The river at her feet moaned dismally, as if trying to make her feel its sorrow with her own; and the wind among the branches sighed, as if telling her of its troubles, too. Even after the first energy of her emotion was

spent, she kept on weeping, not on her own account, but on account of the wind and the water, which craved her sympathy and appreciated it when she gave it.

Presently her eyes cleared, so that she could see the river and the trees on the opposite bank; but even then there were spells when a mist would shut out everything for a little while, and she thrilled with a sensibility which found vent only in slow, helpless tears. She wept until she no longer felt revengeful and spiteful, until she was ashamed of what she had said to Hulse, and resolved in her soul never to be guilty of such an act again.

That resolution did her good. It consoled her to believe that she was capable of doing better; it offset prospectively the abominable impression she had produced. She magnified that impression in all possible ways, and felt a fierce satisfaction in contemplating herself through Hulse's eyes. With this satisfaction was mingled another of a different kind, namely: that she could have behaved herself like a lady if she had tried, and that she would show him in the future that she was a lady in spite of his just predisposition to the contrary.

It was the first time she ever really regretted anything of her doing, and the regret enlightened her considerably concerning herself. It made her feel less absolute and more conditioned—a discovery which was not altogether pleasant in spite of the sense of enlightenment accompanying it. The idea of personal value, while not exclusively a growth of Western minds, is so predominant among the inhabitants of those regions that many are inclined to regard it as indigenous to the soil. I have seen restaurant waiters in the mining districts of the Pacific Coast Region who seemed to believe that all the great men of the world were busy with astronomical instruments vainly endeavoring to determine their altitude. Maria's sudden self-distrust was significant of an ability

to reconstruct her conceptions of herself on a firmer basis than that of personal estimate. She felt humble and docile and womanly ; she longed to begin at once on a course of action which should meet the approval of people who knew what was the right thing to approve ; she felt the need of being tenderer to everybody, and of having people think well of her ; she wanted to atone for her ridiculous assumptions of dignity by subduing and mortifying herself in her future actions. She sat a long time listening to the water and looking out over the lone, level, far-stretching valley.

That hour under the cottonwoods was a revelation of many new things concerning herself and her relations to her fellows. A little self-examination was what she had long needed. Her old standard became all at once valueless ; she determined to look around her at once in search of new and better ones. It is not difficult to follow evil with the enthusiasm of an ideal : half the world does so devoutly, without knowing it. It was to Maria's credit that, as soon as she discovered that she had been doing this all her life, she set about finding the means of restoring her confidence on a more solid foundation.

Without knowing it herself, she had begun her conflict with Hulse with the intention of converting his indifference into admiration ; she had ended by discovering that his standard of measurement, while not correct in detail,—she was not yet prepared to admit so much as that,—was certainly more nearly exact than her own, and that she had made herself impressive only by her offensiveness. She had mistaken a disease for a power ; she bore no resemblance to the all-important, all-subduing woman she had supposed herself to be. She had been to blame for everything, even for his indifference ; it was because of her obvious deficiencies that he had been enabled to classify her at once where she belonged. She had in-

tended to impress him with perfections which he did not suspect ; instead of that, she had disclosed deformities which she might have kept concealed. She saw it all now—her mind passed from doubt to uncertainty in a slow increase of light, as she had seen the mountains emerge from the mist at sunrise.

Our movements of self-exploration result in odd discoveries. It seemed to Maria that hereafter her decisions must be utterly valueless, torn from the fertile soil of her self-esteem and transplanted into the less congenial medium of self-distrust. She saw herself closed in by ever-narrowing horizons of ignorance, wandering forever helpless and—yes, aspiring. For the worst of it—or the best of it—was that she could never be her old self again. There were better things in life than she had ever dreamed of, though what they were she could not guess. Hulse knew and could tell her if he chose, but she would never ask him. He knew of worse things, too, she had no doubt, but that did not matter.

She wished she could find out just what his idea of a perfect woman was. She was very humble in her new mood, having a vision minutely, materially distinct of what he thought of her, of the contempt he must feel for her. She pictured herself occupying a place in his thoughts as a creature of stupendous abilities for doing outrageous things,—a sort of moral ogress with a palate hungry for people of superior manners. She imagined herself so impressive in her hatefulness that he would go through life thinking of her every day, and smiling with cool criticism at her violence, which she had been led to believe was commendable and a sign of a great soul. Well, all that was now past ; but what could she do to redeem herself ? She had no recollection of any woman who needed redemption. Poor Maria's fears, when she thought of the future which this man had

opened up, were somehow invariably multiples of her hopes. If Hulse were only a different sort of man, more human, more likeable, there would be no trouble in finding out what to do ; she would go directly to him and ask. But that was impossible. She intended never to look upon his face again.

Most people are aware of love as a slow-growing power, like the song which smoothes itself against the young lark's throat, wooing the strength to roughen it and prove the wisdom of its silence. It is often a sweet lesson conned in an idle hour and remembered as a poem is remembered, by rhythm and melody ; but sometimes it is a whirlwind which stupefies the soul to its dread presence, and is known forever afterward by the desolation it leaves behind.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE next morning, instead of starting out with pick and shovel, as his custom was, Billy found it necessary to lay in a supply of wood for his cabin fire. He had already chopped down most of the pines close to the cabin, leaving those which were high up among the rocks and near to the water, partly because it was inconvenient to carry the wood down the steep declivity, but partly also because he felt a fine appreciation for the concord between the mournful monotone of the pines and the lovelier music of the waterfall. He liked to listen at night to the slow swelling and dying away of their melody, filling the little cañon with sad minor cadences and making the darkness vibrate with serious sympathy.

He shouldered his axe and went up the cañon. Presently he ascended a trail which led to the top of a hill on the left side of the cañon. On the summit he paused a little to get his breath after the climb, and to look around him and draw in the freer air of this height. He was facing the west ; the far-off mountains were shrouded in mist ; the valley lay close and gray, and in its midst flowed what seemed a songless, shoreless river, sky-dropped and drifting outward to the sky. The moon was sinking slowly into the mist that hulled the western mountains. It looked like a tired, white-winged bird fluttering down the heavens, yet so near that Billy almost imagined he could reach out and take it in his hands. The sun was well up in the east, but as yet his warm rays had no effect on those far-off mists at the opposite pole of the horizon.

"I'd like Maria to see it," Billy thought, leaning the head of his ax against a rock while he braced his elbow against the helve and looked around him. "She'd like it, I know she would. I'll ask 'er to come up some mornin' 'n' take a look at it with me, or mebbe she'd like it better at sunset."

He had devoted considerable time and attention to speculating on Maria's likes and dislikes, and had found the subject inexhaustible. He took to liking things vigorously which he knew pleased her. After she told him how fond she was of running water, he was able to distinguish a new melodious note in the music of the waterfall near his cabin. The spring song of the birds was pleasanter, knowing that she loved it. With this delight in taking up her experiences and sharing them, had come a keener desire to have him with her constantly, participating in his pleasures with a measure of the sympathy he had for hers. All things suggested to him the sweetness of such sympathy. A flush of red light on the morning mist; the slow movement of the clouds, those aimless daughters of the air who wander carelessly, but are never tired; the frightful splendor of sunset clouds that seemed a-drip with blood; everything he saw and heard made him wish that she were with him to talk about it. And, though he had never before been so susceptible to the beauty of the world around him, had never been so deeply impressed with watching the smouldering embers of sunset die out slowly while the shadows folded the departing day, never had felt so deliciously tired and tranquil after wandering at night under the big, low-hanging stars, yet when he tried to tell her of these things he could say nothing. Words are at once the enemies and friends of thought; and Billy found them poor helps indeed, when obliged to depend upon them alone for the expression of his sensibilities.

After a cold lunch at about one o'clock Billy put on his tremendous neck-tie, combed his hair carefully, and started to fill his dinner engagement at the Pugsleys'. He saw Maria in the doorway before he reached the cabin, and thought to himself that he had never seen her half so beautiful.

As soon as she saw him she cried aloud to some one inside the cabin, "W'y, here's Billy!" and then came to the edge of the veranda to meet him.

"We didn't reckon ye'd be 'long so soon," she said, with a look of genuine pleasure.

"Well, I hope I ain't too soon to be welcome," he answered, laughing.

"Hardly," was her reply. "Ye'll allus be welcome where *I* be. Come in, come in, 'n' set down."

Billy entered the cabin, taking off his hat as he did so. Maria pushed a bench toward him,—one of several which she had induced her father to knock together as substitutes for chairs,—and repeated her invitation to be seated. Then she took his hat, after a faint resistance on his part, and hung it up on a nail by the window.

"There!" she said, with friendly triumph, "ye wasn't a-goin' to give it to me, was ye?"

"W'y, I don't want to make no trouble," he answered. "The floor's good 'nough fer *my* hat, 'n' if 'tain't, I can wait on myself. How d'ye find yerself to-day, Mis' Pugsley? Better, I hope?"

Mrs. Pugsley adjusted her crinoline with ostentatious nicety, and raised herself a little way on her blankets with as much effort for effect as if she had been posing for Venus rising from the sea.

"Yes, I reckon I may say I'm better, young man," she replied with dignity. "'N' I ain't got no call to say I ain't glad 'n' proud when I'm asked how I be, even if I never hope to say I'm well; 'n' we're very glad o' yer

comp'ny to dinner, Mr. Bling. 'N' I've spoke fer the gizzard, which is my fav'rite."

After making this last statement in a solemn and official manner, she settled back and assumed a more conversational tone.

"We didn't git up till eight o'clock this mornin', 'n' seems to me like they ain't been no time to do nothin' all day long. I've jes' been layin' here 'n' thinkin' 't Mariar orter a-got up earlier when she knowed we was goin' to have comp'ny like this 'ere. She's had to fly to git things ready, I tell ye. I ain't sure 't the vittles 'll be done the way they orter be, nohow ; but I can't help it, stretched out 'ere the way I be with the pains a-jumpin' through me. She orter a-got up earlier, I should say. I'm afeerd she's a-gittin' pompered with lux'ry."

"Well, I don't b'lieve in settin' up all night so's to be sure o' bein' up in the mornin'," said Maria.

"Nor I," said Billy. "My mornin' snooze 's the best part o' my sleep. Ain't yer dad nowheres aroun'? I 'spected he'd be 'ere, sure."

"Oh, he'll be on hand fer the chicken, ye can go a-gamblin' o' that." Maria's resolution to be good had not yet produced a reform in her language, and she was as slangy as ever. "He likes chicken equal to a preacher. He's hangin' aroun' the saloons, I reckon, same as usual. He never got treated so much nowheres afore."

A conscious look must have crept into Billy's face for she cried out immediately :

"I bet ye've been a-givin' 'im money !"

He did not answer, but his looks spoke plainly enough for him.

"Have ye, now?" she insisted.

He laughed rather sheepishly.

"Well, they ain't no use denyin' it as I know of," he said. "I give 'im a couple o' dollars day afore yisterday

jes' fer luck. I heerd ye say as he was better nater'd when he had a drop or two to keep 'im up."

"So he is—so he is. Lor', I told 'im only this mornin' 't if he could smell his own breath it 'ud save him two bits every time he opened his mouth. 'N' there ye was at the bottom o' it!"

"I hope ye don't mind?" said Billy, anxiously.

"Mind? oh, no; I don't mind. All I mind 'bout is his gittin' too much 'n' commencin' his howlin'. He's awful then."

"He seems to think a heap o' his fam'ly," remarked Billy.

"Oh, yes, he does. I reckon they ain't no man no-where 't's prouder o' his wife 'n' gals 'n' what dad is. At the same time he don't seem to have no idee o' doin' nothin' fer us. He likes us fust rate, but he likes doin' nothin' a deal sight better."

"Oh, well, I reckon it's a habit," said Billy with indulgence.

"Yes, it's a habit—that's jes' it, 'n' a mighty bad one, too. It's a habit. If it was a accident I could overlook it easier. It's one thing to step into the mud absent-minded like, but it's 'nother to stan' there shif'less till it dries 'n' holds ye fast."

Billy laughed.

"Ye're ruther hard on yer dad," he said. "'N' that's nat'ral, bein' 't ye're so dif'rent yerself."

"Well, I ain't much like 'im, 'n' that's a fack. I d' know 's I'm like nobody. Ma says they ain't no Swipes in me, so I d' know who or what I be."

"She cert'nly ain't no Swipes," affirmed the moist woman. "Not half the Swipes 't Maud Elizy is."

"Talkin' o' Maud Elizy sets me a-wonderin' where she's likely to be," said Maria. "Traipsin' 'n' trollopin'

the camp, I reckon, 's usual. She orter be slapped 'n' shet up in the woodshed."

"Why, Mariar," put in her mother in a reproachful tone, "the gal mus' have a little fun wunst in a while. She ain't like what *you* be; ye don't seem to understand 'er."

"She ain't too deep fer common folks to understand, nohow," declared Maria.

"She's all Swipes, Maud Elizy is," pursued the old woman without noticing the interruption, "'n' somehow ye never seem to see jes' what that is. The Swipes' nater goes beyond ye. Maud Elizy 's all fer laffin' 'n' takin' on 'n' havin' a good time. She's jes' like I was, her age—jes' zackly. 'N' if she don't git out 'n' rustle 'roun' 'n' ketch a man fer 'erself, I'd like to know who's a-goin' to do it fer 'er? I can't, laid up here with my sides a-splittin' off o' me. 'N' if she was like *you* 'n' treated all the fellers the way ye did that Hulse yisterday, I'd like to know where her chances 'ud be?"

Maria flushed scarlet.

"Hulse is dif'rent from the rest o' 'em," she said, in weak justification.

"I reckon ye made 'im feel sick," cried Billy in a tone of glee. "He allus has his nose in the air, though he don't seem to know it, 'n' it 'll do 'im good to have it lowered."

"Oh, I d' know," replied Maria in an altered voice. "I'm ruther 'shamed o' what I done. I hadn't got no call to ack so."

"He's a queer-lookin' critter," remarked Mrs. Pugsley. "The las' one I'd want fer a son-in-law if I had any choosin' in the bizness. I wouldn't know how to git aroun' sech a man. I couldn't tell whether I'd reely got 'im or not."

"Prob'ly some wooman's give 'im the shake some time

or other," said Maria, still flushing. "I've heerd how that makes some men queer in their heads. Don't that air chicken smell good, though, a-boilin' 'n' a-steamin'? I like the smell o' it 'mos' 's well 's I do the taste."

"Ye may have the smell if ye like," returned Mrs. Pugsley, solemnly. "But I'll take the gizzard fer mine, every time. I wonder why chickens wa'n't made all gizzard, Mariar? I'm sure they'd a-been a heap better feedin'."

CHAPTER XXII.

“WE might go out ’n’ set on the verandy steps, I should think,” said Billy after a little while. “Ye won’t have to fix the table fer some time yit, ’n’ the pertaters ’n’ chicken ’ll keep on bilin’ ’thout our stayin’ in here. ’N’ ain’t it ruther warm, spite o’ the door bein’ open?”

“Well, mebbe ’tis. I like it better in the air, anyhow. The river sounds plainer out there.”

She went to the stove and lifted the tin pan which served as lid to the kettle in which the chicken was boiling, and gazed in with housewifely solicitude, giving the contents a thoughtful poke or two with her steel fork, then followed him out upon the veranda with the fork still in her hand.

“It’s awful pleasant to have the river so near,” she said, seating herself at his side. “I never git tired o’ it, day nor night.”

“Yes. Sence ye spoke to me ’bout it I’ve had the same feelin’ fer the water up there to my place. When I wake up in the night, the sound o’ it seems sort o’ friendly.”

“I warrant it does,” said Maria. “’N’ it’s a kind o’ friendship a body don’t git tired of. That’s the test o’ friendship—when it lasts ’thout makin’ a feller tired.”

“I hope ye ain’t in the habit o’ gettin’ tired o’ yer friends?” said Billy.

“No, I don’t reckon I be. But they’s lots o’ folks ’t a body seems to git sick of purty quick. They don’t last,—familiarity wears ’em thin in less ’n’ no time. Ye know

what I mean,—it gits to be a trouble, fearin' 't they may tear into rags if ye touch em 'n' nothin' be left but a few scraps here 'n' there to reproach ye."

"Yes, I've seen that sort o' folks."

"'N' they's some 't has sech a heap o' meanness in 'em 'n' yit manage to cover it up so 't ye don't s'pect,—anyways fer a long time. They ain't no tellin' what they be from what they say 'n' do. I hate that wuss 'n' anything. It's like ye can't jedge by the jinglin' how much money they is in a man's pocket. More likely 'n not he's got a lot o' keys or suthin' in there 't makes the noise."

"That's so," said Billy, with an emphatic nod.

"I hate fuss 'n' make-believe," continued Maria. "The man 't makes the biggest splashin' in the wash-basin don't allus come out with the cleanest face. I like folks to show right out plain what they be, 'n' then I know how to take 'em."

"It's a wicked world," remarked Billy, vaguely, discerning that Maria was in a pessimistic mood, and that she expected him to share it with her.

"Yes, a wicked world," she repeated, stabbing her fork into the wooden step and drawing it out with a wrench. "'N' sometimes it seems to me like I'm the very wickedest critter a-runnin' in it."

"Oh, Lor', no," replied Billy, not prepared to go into extremes in that rash way. "*You* wicked! what a idee!"

"Oh, ye d' know me," declared Maria, stabbing her fork into the step repeatedly. "Ye think I'm good, but ye d' know me. Dad's right when he calls me a terror. I *am* a terror—I'm jes' what he says—I'm the Devil's Own."

"That's all stuff," said Billy, in a tone of conviction. "*I* say ye're the best woman I ever seen,—I won't even except my mother. 'N' she's in heaven, if they's a place fer good folks to go to when they're dead."

"Ye d' know me," she repeated, gloomily. "I'm a terror,—I'm a terror to the world!"

Billy glanced at her with shy insistence.

"Anyhow, ye're good 'nough fer *me*," he said. She did not seem to hear him.

"All the trouble 'n' bother I ever had 's jes' come from my bein' sech a case."

"Oh, shucks!" said Billy, sympathetic but unbelieving.

"Well, it's so, anyhow," she affirmed. "I *am* a case. 'N' it's been a-worryin' me a good deal lately. I didn't sleep good las' night fer thinkin' o' it."

"Fer thinkin' o' yer wickedness?" said Billy with a laugh. "Oh, Lor'!"

"Well, I didn't sleep, anyhow, 'n' ye may laugh 's much 's ye like. But it's no laughin' matter."

"I won't laugh no more, then."

They sat for some time, and he did not attempt to disturb her. She was looking out toward the river, where the water flashed in the sun as it slipped between the scarred trunks of the cottonwoods. She held her fork in both hands now, and her arms were resting rigidly on her knees. All at once she turned toward him and spoke in an abrupt, earnest tone:

"I've been thinkin' what I mus' do to make a better wooman out o' myself, Billy. I want to be a better wooman."

Billy looked at her as puzzled as trying to follow her in a course of abstract reasoning. That she should want to be better was little short of incomprehensible. Was she not the best and most beautiful being in the world naturally and without any effort of her own? And did not everybody recognize her as such who came near her? The idea that she was wicked was absurd. He could not locate her except as an incarnate perfection.

“W’y, Mariar—” he began.

But she interrupted him before he could go further.

“I want to be better,” she repeated, seriously, with her eyes fixed again on the gliding river. “I want to be more like *reel* wimmin,—I want to know things. Lor’, I d’ know nothin’, I don’t.”

“Ye know loads more ’n some folks ’t purtend to be smarter,” said Billy. She seemed far enough away from him now in the fulness of her strength and beauty; what would she be if the wisdom of books were added to her natural advantages? “D’ye mean ye’re goin’ to take to readin’ books, then?”

“I thought o’ it las’ night when I was layin’ awake,” she said, still more seriously. “But I ain’t sure ’t that’s what I want,—I ain’t sure o’ nothin’. D’ye reckon all them fine wimmin down to ’Frisco knows how to read?”

“I reckon they do.”

“It come into my head ’t it might be a good thing to know books in that permis’cus way ’t ye could pick one up anywheres ’n’ read it ’thout stoppin’ to spell out the words. They mus’ be a heap in ’em if a feller only knowed how to git it out. I used to read the Bible a little, but I didn’t seem to enjoy it much. I had one ’t Maud Elizy stole wunst when we was little gals ’n’ went into a church in San José while a feller was sweepin’ out. They was lots o’ Bibles ’n’ hymn books ’n’ sech layin’ aroun’ on the seats, ’n’ she chucked one under ’er aporn ’n’ carried it off. I reckon if I could read the Bible right along easy, I might git a right smart o’ good out o’ it. But it was hard to spell through the words.”

“I ’member my mother used to read in the Bible,” said Billy. “She done it every evenin’, reg’lar. She’d draw ’er chair up to the table where the candles was ’n’ read there a hour to a time, jes’ ’s peaceful ’n’ quiet. I can ’member how good she allus looked, a-sittin’ so.”

“ She could read right off, couldn’t she ? ”

“ Oh, yes. ”

“ I shouldn’t wonder if that was jes’ what I wanted. I’ve lost my Bible now—the one what Maud Elizy stole. I d’ know what’s become o’ it. I reckon it tumbled out o’ the waggin som’ers when we was on the go. But they’s newspapers. I reckon a feller could use newspapers. ” Poor Maria’s ideas of the means employed in being good were full of the hazy indistinctness which characterizes a broad landscape.

“ Hulse might lend ye some o’ his books, ” said Billy, with a touch of bitterness.

Maria flushed. Did Billy, in a measure, suspect the truth ? She was inclined to believe so, and resented his penetration as an intrusion into the privacy of her own soul. But she did not dare to give utterance to her resentment ; it would testify to the truthfulness of his suspicions.

“ I don’t want none o’ his books, ” she said, trying to speak naturally and succeeding to a degree that surprised herself. “ I wouldn’t ask ’im fer ’em, nohow. ’N’, ’sides that, I doubt if I could understan’ ’em if I had ’em. ”

“ Well, I have my doubts ’bout all books ’ceptin’ the Bible, ” said Billy. “ The Bible ’s all right, but ye can’t never tell ’bout the others. ”

“ Then ye wouldn’t try it, if ye was me ? ”

“ No, I wouldn’t. ”

She looked at him thoughtfully.

“ Then I reckon I won’t, ” she said.

Billy beamed.

“ Hulse’s books ain’t made ’im no happier nor better, ” he said. “ It’s my ’pinion ye’re jes’ ’s well off a-lettin’ that air truck alone. ”

She was silent awhile and did not look at him, but he felt somehow uncomfortable, as if she were on the point

of saying something severe but were suppressing the inclination. He wished he had not spoken quite so positively ; what right had he to tell her that she would better let that truck alone ? If she should burst forth with an angry retort, how could he answer her ?

“ Hulse might be a heap unhappier if he didn’t have his books,” she responded, and her voice trembled a little, though not with anger. “ ‘N’ how do I know how much I’m missin’ by not bein’ able to read, too ? It’s a awful bother to learn, I hain’t no doubt, but when a feller got so ‘t he could do it fast, why—they *mus’* be suthin’ in it, or else why do all the preachers ‘n’ other good folks read so much ? ”

She stabbed her fork into the step again and broke off a splinter of the light pine.

“ Well,” said Billy, yielding as his habit was, “ they ain’t no denyin’ ‘t they’s a heap in knowin’ things ‘t ‘s to be knowed. I’m often s’prised at things I d’ know nothin’ ‘bout.”

“ I ain’t never s’prised at things I d’ know nothin’ ‘bout,” she answered. “ I’m used to that. But I’m frekently s’prised at things I do know. I ain’t *quite* a fool, if I *don’t* know nothin’ ‘bout book-learnin’. ‘N’ I ain’t a-goin’ to say ‘t lots o’ things I know ain’t more useful ‘n what the gals down to ‘Frisco learn ‘t go to school in them big buildin’s. Lor’, I’ve heerd tell o’ their sayin’s, sometimes, ‘n’ seems to me like they *mus’* be awful sawneys. Mebbe if I’d take to learnin’ I’d git like that. Mebbe they’s some sort o’ danger, like, in books ‘t a feller ‘d have to look out fer. Mebbe they’re suthin’ like spectacles—they help or hinder the sight, ‘n’ it can’t be said aforehand which they’re goin’ to do.”

Billy smiled at her earnestness and shook his head.

“ Fust ye’re all fer books, a body ‘d think, ‘n’ then ye’re

all agin 'em. It's sort o' hard to make out jes' what ye mean."

She smiled back at him with a measure of her customary brightness.

"Well, don't try, then. It's 'nough fer us 't we're good friends, ain't it, even if we don't allus see clean through each other? 'N' we air good friends, Billy," she cried, cordially. "We've been so ever sence we met, 'n' we're goin' to keep right on, ain't we? It needn't bother us 't we're sometimes puzzled at each other. Lor', I don't reckon 't most o' us see through ourselves clear, let alone other folks. We say we see the sky, but what do we know o' its depths 'n' bounds?"

Her return to a tone of confidence and friendship caused a thrill of warmth in Billy's heart. His voice trembled a little with suppressed eagerness as he spoke after a little preparatory pause.

"We may not know very much o' ourselves, as ye say, but they's one thing 't I could allus be sure of, no matter what else I couldn't see plain: if I loved a wooman I'd know it, 'n' I'd love 'er honest 'n' true." He knew that this rapid particularization might prove disastrous,—he was never at all certain of the manner in which she would receive his advances,—but he could not restrain himself. The words had a life of their own and would not be held back. Anyway her avowal of friendship gave him something like a right to be distinctive and descriptive in speaking of himself.

She examined her fork with assiduous attention.

"I should think anybody 'd know when they was in love," she said, pressing the tines together and then letting them fly apart. "I'm sure I shall. I don't reckon I'll be backward 'bout comin' forrard 'n' lettin' it be known, nuther. I don't flatter myself I'm over bashful. Lor', there's Maud Elizy 'n' dad comin' with their noses up

a-smellin' that chicken afar off. Didn't I tell ye they'd be here in time? I mus' go in 'n'see to things."

Maud Elizy went around to the woodshed and Ephraim came up to Billy, grinning. His life may be described as one long, unsightly grin. Even the variation of what he was pleased to call a "'casional little debauch" did not effectually break the monotony of his grimaces.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARIA remained standing at Billy's side till her father came up. Her eyes were roaming absently, and she seemed touched by a slow appreciation of the magnificent landscape.

"It's a day straggled from heaven, ain't it?" she said. "It'll be this way right along, now, I reckon. It gives a body a relief o' mind when the rainy season's reely over, don't it? It makes me feel like I was beginnin' everything over agin."

She let her gaze rest a moment on the distant mountains, above which the heaped white clouds rose like icebergs that rest a little before a current comes and bears them away. Then she sighed unconsciously and went into the house.

Ephraim sat down in her place and Billy talked to him in an aimless fashion, listening all the time to the sound of Maria's footsteps within. Now she was going to the cupboard for something: now she was lifting the pan from the kettle and poking the steaming contents, as he had seen her do before she came out with him upon the veranda; now she was going into the woodshed for wood. He heard the clatter of the sticks as she flung them down by the stove when she came back into the room, and presently she returned to the door and spoke to her father.

"Ye'll have to come 'n' split some more wood, dad," she said. "That's all gone 't ye split las' night."

"Lem'me go 'n' do it," said Billy, as Ephraim rose to obey her.

But Maria would not hear of that, and pushed him playfully back into his seat. He was an invited guest to-day, and must do nothing like work while he was there in that capacity.

"I used to be a dandy at wood-splittin'," she said. "But I don't do it no more 'nless I have to. I chopped my toe wunst with the axe 'n' that made me kind o' shy."

"Did it hurt the axe?" asked Billy, gravely.

"Oh, ye silly!" she laughed, shaking her fork at him and re-entering the house.

After a while she shouted to him that dinner was ready, and he had the honor of assisting Mrs. Pugsley to rise from her blankets—a performance which the moist woman accomplished with a great deal of groaning and ostentatious management of crinoline.

When they were seated at table and Maria was pouring the coffee, she said:

"Well, dad, where ye been all afternoon? We missed yer gentle cackle 'n' Billy was 'quirin' fer ye."

"Oh, I was 'roun' camp," replied Ephraim.

"Lookin' under yer little finger?" inquired Maria.

Ephraim grinned.

"Well, fer the sake o' argyment, we'll say I was lookin' under my little finger. Boosey sells a mighty good bran' o' whiskey fer this part o' the country."

"Well, dish up the chicken 'n' don't set there a-grinnin'. Don't ye see ma's waitin' fer the gizzard? Pass yer dish, ma, quick! I'm goin' to see 't ye're waited on fust."

But the moist woman seemed to have been seized by a sudden spasm of humanity and settled back in her seat, shaking her head mournfully.

"Don't quar'l 'bout me," she said. "I hate quar'lin'. 'Sides, I ain't nobody to quar'l 'n' fight over. If anybody wants the gizzard they can have it. I ain't got no right to it if they's anybody else 't feels the need o' it."

“ Oh, Lor’, ma,” cried Maria, heartily, “ pass yer plate ’n’ don’t jaw. Don’t ye see dad’s waitin’ ?”

“ Mebbe Mr. Bling ’ud like it,” said Mrs. Pugsley in a fatal tone.

“ Oh, no !” cried Billy. “ I’d allus ruther have a leg !”

“ Maud Elizy’s fond o’ the gizzard, I know,” quavered Mrs. Pugsley. “ Let ’er have it, Ephraim. I ain’t a-goin’ to quar’l. Nobody shall have it to say o’ me when I’m dead ’t I wa’n’t a good mother to my own flesh ’n’ blood.”

“ I don’t want it,” declared Maud Eliza. “ I’m goin’ to have the wish-bone ’n’ stick it up over the door.”

“ Mariar wants it then,” said Mrs. Pugsley.

“ No, no !” affirmed Maria.

“ Well, I know Ephraim does. Take it, Ephraim, dear. I’ve been a good wife to ye ’n’ allus will be. Gimme the backbone ’n’ the ribs, or the neck. They’re ’s good ’s I deserve.”

She passed her plate, looking out of the window and wiping her eyes while he helped her. After he had finished she did not look down at her plate for some time, and when at last she did so it was with the unwilling air of one who has postponed as long as possible a bitter draught of medicine which must be taken.

“ W’y, ye gimme the gizzard, Ephraim !” she cried. Then, with tearful meekness, “ Thankee, dear !”

She wiped her eyes pathetically and cut off a bit and tasted it.

“ I don’t see w’y the hull animal couldn’t a-been gizzard,” she said, more hopefully after discovering the coveted morsel on her plate. “ ’N’ then they could be none o’ this ’ere fussin’ ’n’ quar’lin’.”

“ Lor’,” cried Maria, merrily, “ if ’twas all gizzard ye’d be a-gettin’ so fat ye couldn’t see over yerself, ma. I wonder the hull o’ us ain’t in that fix with all the good

things we've been a-feastin' on lately. Have some o' the gravy on yer pertater, Billy. Ye like chicken gravy, I hope?"

"Well, I should say I did!" declared Billy. "Ain't it yer own make?"

"Pooh! that ain't no reason fer likin' it. Maud Elizy, set the salt where he can run his knife into it 'n' git what he wants. 'N' the bread's too fur away,—shove it over into the middle o' the table 'n' make yerself useful. Billy mus' git all he can carry, fer wunst. He bought it, 'n' a man mus' suffer the consequence o' his piety."

"Great piety, that!" cried Billy, between mouthfuls.

"Well, call it charity, then. We're a ragged lot, we air, but I d' know where we'd be if it wa'n't fer your doin' fer us. We never was quite so low down afore, seems to me. They's lots o' folks 't can easier drop a tear 'n' a penny, but *you* ain't that sort, I'll go bail to say. Look at Maud Elizy! Don't she bear down on that wish-bone heavy?"

Maud Eliza was too busy to answer more definitely than by a smothered titter.

"Don't she come right down on it with both feet?" continued Maria with mock admiration. "Ain't she courageous to tackle it single-handed like that?"

"Oh, yes, ole funny!" said Maud Eliza, compelled to some more specific form of articulation.

"Well, I'm glad we don't live in the city, anyhow," said Maria, glancing out of the window and changing the subject at sight of the free sky and glad sunshine. "I never did live there, 'n' I never 'tend to. It makes a body feel like you wa'n't nothin' 't all. Here ye can git yer breath 'n' spread yerself over 's much groun' 's ye like, but there a man's life ain't no more count 'n a red ant's is in the country. That makes a feller feel so little 'n' mean."

"But they's more style there," said Mrs. Pugsley,

rousing herself and speaking with interest. "Ye can git the latest things cheap in them second-hand stores on Fourth Street. I went in 'n' looked aroun."

"They's orfle deceitful folks in them cities," remarked Ephraim, gnawing a bone and speaking with an air of paternal wisdom. "I doubt if it's good to raise a fam'ly o' gals in these 'ere towns."

"I hate deceitful people," affirmed Maria, who always had a great deal to say on this subject. "'N' that's one reason why I wouldn't like to live in a town. A feller never d' know what or who folks was. Seems like the proper caper there's to let on 't ye're suthin' 't ye reely ain't; that's city folks' stronghold. I say the strongest man 's the one 't 's strong 'nough jes to be hisself 'n' nothin' else. It's all right to mistake mica fer gold in the sands o' the river, 'n' sech. Nater don't seem to know no better sometimes 'n' to seem what she ain't; but folks orter know better. I hate a man 't 'll go 'roun' with the demure, pious look o' a Mexican mule, 'n' all to wunst kick out behind 'n' send ye flying sky-high. They're a crafty lot, them city fellers. They's lots o' 'em whose only honor is their aptness at lyin', 'n' yit they'd make ye think they was heavenly churribs, they've got that mount o' cheek. Excuse me from *them*, please," she finished, with a show of elaborate politeness.

Billy laughed.

"I hate deceitful folks, too," he said.

"Lor' yes. Have 'nother pertater. They's plenty more in the kittle."

"No more pertaters, thankee."

"Well, 'nother chunk o' the chicken, then. Dad, ain't that a wing over there to the fur end o' the dish? Give 'im that. Ye like the wing, don't ye?"

"Yes, it's a wing," said Maud Eliza, peering into the dish and identifying the morsel by lifting it half-way out

of the gravy with her fork. "I had the other one after I finished the wish-bone."

"Pass yer plate, then, Billy. Dad, give 'im the wing."

"Well, if it is a wing—" said Billy, lifting his plate.

But at this juncture—an almost tragic interruption occurred. Mrs. Pugsley, whose fluctuations of humility and arrogance could never be calculated beforehand, suddenly dropped her blasted-by-disappointment air and spoke with unexpected authority.

"Ephraim, *I'll take the wing!*" she cried, thrusting her plate in front of Billy's with a regal movement.

There was a moment of painful silence.

"Why, ma!" cried Maria, taken by surprise and unable to grapple with the difficulties of the situation.

"I'll take the wing," repeated Mrs. Pugsley in an awful tone, tilting her plate from side to side impatiently. "I reckon I'm in my own house 'n' at my own table 'n' have a right to say suthi'n 'bout what's to go into my own insides!"

"But Billy paid for it," said Maria, faintly.

Billy had replaced his plate on the table in front of him and was laughing good-naturedly.

"Oh, let 'er have it," he said, without a trace of the embarrassment Maria expected him to show. "I'd ruther have the other leg, anyhow. I didn't see it was there when I said I'd take the wing."

Maria gave him a grateful look.

"Ye're the best natered feller I ever see," she said, with something like enthusiasm. "Lor', yer mustn't mind ma. She ain't well, ye know."

Billy flushed blissfully.

"Oh, I know," he said.

"My health wa'n't never better," asserted the moist woman, gnawing her wing defiantly. "Ye needn't try to make a case out o' that, Marlar. 'N' I reckon a woo-

man has a right to her say-so wunst in a while in her own house 'n' to her own table, sick or well."

Maria did not carry the subject farther, and while they were eating their dessert,—the "apple grunt" which Maud Eliza had eulogized the day before—Maria said :

"I'm goin' to leave the dishes fer ye to do all by yer-self this time, Maud Eliza. I got every speck o' the dinner 'n' it's only fair. I want to git out into the fresh air 'n' take a walk. Ye'll go with me, won't ye, Billy? It'll be better 'n stayin' cooped up in the house."

"Lor', yes, I'll go," replied Billy, eagerly.

So when the meal was ended they started out together in that state of serenity which succeeds a comfortable dinner and puts one at peace with one's self and all the world. The exalted state of the human mind the world over is intimately connected with the comfortable fulness of a reliable stomach.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE clouds, more like icebergs than ever, were floating southward beyond the mountains as if the current had come which was to bear them onward ; the rest of the sky was brilliantly blue and clear. Billy and Maria went directly to the river's bank, then turned and walked down stream.

When they came to the log where Maria had indulged in her fit of weeping, she sat down again as naturally as if from long habit, and Billy took his place at her side. That spot was destined to be the scene of some of the most tragic events of their lives.

Maria's eyes were bright, her cheeks were glowing. One might have discovered in her strong young womanhood an impersonation of all the beneficent powers of earth and air,—free winds, clear waters, wholesome natural noises somehow transformed into good flesh and blood and ruled by honest human impulses. To Billy she was more than that,—she was the woman he loved. He sat at her side contentedly, a willing example of the natural dominion of woman over man.

As for Maria, her thoughts were running on her recent resolve to be a good woman and calculating how it was possible to bring that miracle about. Her old rules of conduct had fallen away from her suddenly, mysteriously, and left her stupid and staring as if at the vanishing of a group of well-known people in broad daylight. This interval of stunned uncertainty was likely to admit of some surprising actions on her part.

She sat for some moments watching the slow, grave movement of the clouds and listening to the murmurous sound of the water. The noise made her sad and dreamy ; it always seemed trying to bear her away from herself into far distant lands where the world was brighter and life was a thing to be enjoyed in beautiful, indefinite ways. She forgot the river, the clouds, the sunshine. Her face grew as far away in its expression as were her thoughts. If she was thinking at all, she did not know it. Yet she had the wrapt look of one who listens to inward music.

Billy's voice broke in upon her suddenly.

"W'y, what in the world be ye thinkin' of ?" he cried.

"Ye seemed gone 'way-off, like. Was ye dreamin' ?"

The interruption annoyed her but she laughed.

"I reckon I must a-been," she said. "'N' mighty hard, too, for I'd clean fergot where I was." She looked out once more at the free expanse of plain and mountain without seeming to see them.

She took off her bonnet and let it fall upon the ground at her side and then sat staring down at it in an absent way. Suddenly she turned to Billy and said :

"So yer mother was a religious wooman, was she? She must a-been, to read 'er Bible so regular."

"Yes, she was religious,—one o' the best wimmin 't God ever made."

"She was better off with 'er religion 'n she'd a-been 'thout, it I make no doubt."

"She allus took great comfort in it, I know."

"D'ye reckon a feller could git religion 'thout goin' to all the bother o' learnin' to read ?"

"Lor', yes, I've seen em, back there in Ohio."

"I reckon I better git religion, then," said Maria, rapidly. She made an absent movement to pick up her bonnet, but left it lying. "Mebbe that 's what I need—it mus' be, if it makes folks better ; 'n' then, it couldn't be

much trouble if a feller didn't stop to read. I need to be better, Billy ; 'n' I'd like to git religion if it 'ud help me to behave myself."

Billy smiled, but as soon as he caught sight of her face he became serious.

"W'y, ye're in earnest!" he said.

"O' course I'm in earnest. If they was a preacher 'ere I'd go 'n' see 'im to-morrer 'n' ask 'im how to git religion."

"W'y, it's all right to git religion if a feller can," said Billy. "But it allus seemed to me like they was only a few as *can* git it. I don't fancy a feller can git it jes' by askin' the preacher fer it. It's in the nater o' some,—sort o' in the blood, 'n' they can't no more help havin' it 'n' others can help not havin' it. It was a part o' my mother, seems to me."

"'N' them 't can't git it, what 's goin' to 'come o' them?" asked Maria.

"Oh, they 'll burn in hell," replied Billy, calmly, "if the Lord don't have mercy on 'em at the Las' Day."

"What a pleasin' prospeck fer you 'n' me!" she said. "Ye ain't got religion secret-like, have ye?"

"Oh, no, I never could seem to come up to it. They's lots o' things I can't b'lieve, I keep a-doubtin' 'n' a-doubtin'. If I could swoller the hull thing to wunst, I might be all right, but I can't. I keep a-thinkin' dif'rent pints over, 'n' the more I think, the more I doubt, I never could make it go."

She looked at him with ready understanding.

"That's the way it 'ud be with me, nat'rally, I'm afeerd," she said. "But mebbe, 's ye say, if a feller 'ud make up his mind to go the hull thing at the start 'n' never think no more 'bout it, he might git over the trouble o' doubtin'. I can see they ain't no use tryin' to be religious with a mind full o' doubts. Doubt's the soul's consumptive cough—they ain't no mistakin' what's a-goin' to foller. I'd try

to take the hull thing at one lick 'n' then never think o' it agin. I reckon that 'ud be the best way."

"Yes, if a feller could do it."

"Mebbe I'll try it after a while, if I don't think of nothin' better," said Maria. There was a brook tinkling over its pebbly bed a little way off and falling into the noisy river; she broke off a piece of bark from the log on which she was sitting and tossed it absently into the clear small current.

"They ain't no preacher anywhere 'roun' 'ere 't I could go to?" she said after a pause.

"No."

"Well, I d' know 's I care, nohow. I ain't nat'rally fond o' the breed. Mebbe it's jes' 's well." She flung another bit of bark into the brook and then said:

"Seems sort o' queer to think o' my tryin' to be good at this late day, don't it? Mebbe if I'd a-commenced sooner it wouldn't a-come so tough. But I reckon I can stan' the pressure. Most folks 't I've knowed," she added in faint self-justification, "h'ain't seemed to pay much 'tention to bein' good. Most I've heerd of in the way o' good things is money 'n' grub."

"Yes, money! Everybody wants money. I've seen that till I'm half sick o' the hull money-makin' bizness, sometimes. Money 's a good thing, but they's better things in the world. It ain't everything."

"It brings us into the world, keeps us while we're in it, 'n' fin'ly takes us out o' it," said Maria, gloomily. "I reckon it's a purty ne'sary thing. If I was a man, I'd have it—heaps o' it. The thought o' gettin' it 'ud make me feel like I was a hunter, well-armed 'n' with a bear in full view. I'd have it or die!"

"They's rich wimmin in the world 's well 's rich men," remarked Billy.

"Yes, but they didn't earn it, 'n' they don't count. All

a woman wants 's 'nough to eat 'n' keep 'er covered. I never 'd care to be rich, myself. But if I was a man—"

"I'm glad ye ain't a man," laughed Billy.

"Why?"

"'Cause then we wouldn't be a-settin' 'ere 'n' talkin' in this cof'table way."

She broke off a larger piece of bark and threw it into the river and watched it whirl away.

"I'm glad ye like to set 'ere 'n' talk to me," she said. "Fer I like it, too. 'N' I like to keep it in mind 't ye've been very good to me 'n' my folks, Billy. 'N' mebbe some day the Lord 'll let me pay ye back with interest."

For the moment she forgot that Billy was her lover and remembered only that he was her friend. His recent attentions became but an ill-defined memory in contrast with the many acts of brotherly kindness he had performed for her. Her voice, serious and grateful, made him look into her eyes eagerly. She saw in an instant that he had mistaken her meaning, that he interpreted her gratitude as a more intimate feeling. She did not want him to tell her that he loved her—just yet; he might act it, but not speak it; sometime, perhaps, she would allow it, but not now,—she was not in the mood to-day. She wanted to consider him her good brother to whom she could go in trouble, sure of his sympathy and help; but she did not want a lover. Poor Billy! why could he not understand? She had but one weapon with which to beat him back—a woman's surest, most terrible weapon—mockery, she felt as if she were a cruel woman to use it,—he would look so pitiful with the hope passing out of his face. But what else could she do? There was no use trying to think of him just yet as a lover.

"Thankee fer them words," he said, unconscious of the change which had taken place in her thoughts. "I've been thinkin', Maria—"

She dropped her hands on her knees and stared at him with eyes full of mock incredulity. She did not speak for a moment after interrupting him by her movement, but the time was long enough for him to experience the alienation which accompanies an ill-timed silence.

“Ye’ve been thinkin’? No! Did it make ye tired?” She asked with solicitude. The changed voice fell upon his ear like a discord; he felt her altered mood like a chill in the air. When he tried to speak again, something, he could not tell what, had passed from him and he could not bring it back. She had placed him at a distance, her mind was out of touch with his.

“Oh, be serious,” he said, appealingly, answering her look with a forced, tremulous smile, and feeling weak in the contest of words which she had begun. “As I said, I’ve been thinkin’—”

“‘N’ he still lives!” cried she, flourishing her hand towards the mountains as if to call their attention to a surprising fact. Billy straightened himself on the log and looked offended. He had done nothing to deserve her ridicule, and why did she persist in it?

“Don’t tell me what ’tis ye’ve been thinkin’ ’bout. I won’t hear it,” she cried, shaking her head positively as she saw him about to open his lips. The affair was really becoming tragic to Maria; it cut her to the soul to treat him so, but she knew no other way. Her voice caught a note of fierceness even in its mirthless mockery. “I tell ye I won’t—I won’t! I know I wouldn’t b’lieve it, so what’s the use! ’N’ sides Billy, I’ve been thinkin’ lately too.”

“Well?” he asked, patiently.

She laughed spasmodically.

“It’s ’bout the Bible—it’s been a-runnin’ in my head lately, ’n’ ye ’member I told ye I used to read it some. ’N’ here ’n’ there a idee sticks to me, when I managed to

spell out the words, ye'll have to listen clost to understand' me. They's a heap o' fine reasonin' in it—I've been thinkin' 't the Lord couldn't a-ben good company."

Billy opened his eyes wide.

"Listen," she cried. "The Bible proves it. For else why was Adam lonely in the garden o' Eden with God for a friend 'n' companion?"

Billy opened his mouth in sympathy with his eyes.

"Well *I* can't see what ye're drivin' at—mebbe ye can yerself," he said. The fact was that Maria herself did not see very plainly whither her words tended, but she must say something to prevent him from declaring himself.

"Listen ag'in. It's nat'ral fer people to want to git married, ain't it? We've inherited it from Adam down."

"Yes, it's a nat'ral thing." He was quite certain on that point.

"Well, then," cried Maria, stabbing at nothing with her finger as if impaling her opinion on the air, "I'm a onnat'ral critter,—I'm out o' Adam's seed entirely,—I ain't human, like other folks be, fer I'm sot agin marryin'. Now, I don't want to hear what ye've been thinkin' 'bout. I'm busy." And she picked up her bonnet and commenced plaiting the strings.

Her meaning was plain enough, though he did not understand it in detail. She did not care for him as an lover, only as a friend. What need of understanding more? The conviction filled him with a dull pain, like the aching of diseased nerves. And she sat there through it all, composed and smiling, evidently caring for nothing. All at once by one of those movements of contrast in the mind which make us think of comical things at tragic moments, a couplet came into his head which he had heard the miners sing to a rickety, tuneless air:

"'Tis sweet to love, but oh, 'tis bitter
To love a gal and then not git her,"

and he broke into a harsh laugh. Maria looked up, surprised.

“I wa’n’t laughin’ at ye,” he said apologetically, as if she had accused him. “It was at my own thoughts.” Then he went on more slowly: “I won’t tell ye what I started to, if ye don’t want to hear; prob’ly it’s the las’ time I’ll ever mention it to ye; prob’ly——”

“Well, we can be friends jes’ the same, can’t we?” she asked.

“Yes, we can be friends, I reckon. That’s the next bes’ thing, ain’t it?” And he laughed drearily. Then he was silent a moment or two and she did not dare to speak. But all at once he sprang to his feet, and turned on her with an impulse of suspicion, and there was a rough, undeliberated demand in his voice as he cried, “D’ye love anybody else, Maria? Tell me the truth—I can stan’ it better ’n bein’ left uncertain. Do ye love any other man?”

She smiled, even while she looked up at him anxiously.

“No—no one else,” she answered, and she thought she spoke the truth.

“Not even—that Hulse?”

She rose also and faced him boldly, unflinchingly, for as far as she knew she had nothing to conceal. Her face was on a level with his and he could note its every feature.

“That’s a silly question,” she said in a tone of grave offense. “O’ course I don’t love—that Hulse. How could I when—when I hate ’im? I ’member ye hinted at that wunst afore, down to the house, there. I tell ye I don’t love nobody, ’n’ moreover I don’t want to if it’s a-goin’ to make me pester other folks the way it makes ye pester me.”

He was instantly sorry for his words, and tried to take her hand. But she drew it away.

"I'm sorry," he said, gently. But she turned her back and seemed not to listen.

"I didn't think what I was doin'," he went on, pleadingly. "Ye ain't mad at me, then, be ye? See, Mariar; I'm sorry. Ye won't hate me 'cause I fergot myself fer a minute, will ye?"

"I ain't mad at ye," she answered, coldly. "But it's time to go home. Come."

"'N' we're friends?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, we're friends. I told ye so, didn't I? 'N' didn't I tell ye I cared more fer ye 'n fer any man in the world. Ye orter a-b'lieved me. Come."

Her tone was reassuring, but not warm.

"'N' sometime, Mariar—don't git mad at me fer sayin' it, but seems like I can't help myself to-day—sometime ye'll lemme speak o' it agin, after ye've had a chance to think it over 'n' decide? Ye won't ferbid me that?"

"No, I won't ferbid ye. But not now. Ye mus' wait a long time. I'll have trouble, I'm afeerd, in makin' up my mind. 'N' now let's go. The sun's low on the mountains."

They went back to the cabin together and he left her at the gate. He had not made an explicit declaration of passion, neither had he been unconditionally rejected. Yet she seemed drifting hopelessly away from him, caring for the pain she left behind her only in the selfish sense that she was glad to be free from it. *She* felt no pain in their alienation. For a brief moment he felt like turning back, grasping her and dragging her to him and forcing her somehow to share his misery—like hurting her so that she would remember as vividly as he must remember. But he did nothing. He was so strong in his love that he could bear a great strain in silence. But his silence was full of bitterness.

He passed up the gentle incline between the river and

the foothills, but at the mouth of the little cañon he paused. It looked so dark and lonesome in there, he did not want to go in ; he knew beforehand just how dark and heavy the shadows would seem, how the rocks would shut out the sunshine on all sides and leave nothing bright anywhere but the narrow strip of sky floating like a blue ribbon far above. He sat down drearily at the entrance of the cañon and looked out across the valley. He would never speak to her again on the subject of his love ; how could he with the consciousness of this rebuff between them ? Billy was quite ignorant of the proverbial elasticity of lovers' hopes, and had no idea that in a week's time he would be as hopeful and happy as ever.

The sun was setting redly and the river caught the light wherever the water was visible between the trees. He watched the current dashing from light to gloom, from gloom to light, and reappearing far down the valley as red as if the sunset were rolling in a long-drawn cloud toward the folded ridges of the hills below. Then the west darkened and shook with heavy wind-swung fabrics of sky. It was growing cold, too. He would not look any more ; he must go home. He turned and entered the little cañon. Behind him the torn fringes of the worn-out day dragged heavily on the mountains ; the sunset lights changed ; finally the dark edges of the clouds grew darker, a vivid yellow leaped up where the red had been and the heavens were a broad glare of Austrian black and gold. But Billy was now in the cañon and could not see. He would not have thought it remarkable had he seen that gorgeous sight to-night. What did it matter how the sunset behaved ? Or how dark the cañon was, or how desolate the cabin by the singing waterfall ? Nothing mattered in this miserable world. But he was tired and wanted to rest. He would go in and lie down and maybe he would die before morning, would she care ? he wondered. A

little, maybe—a very little. The world was so different from the world of this afternoon when he had set out to see her. Well, well ! It did not matter. He had lived up to his motto ; he had failed, trying.

CHAPTER XXV.

"WELL, I'm tired to death o' stayin' in doors 'n' I'd like to git out som'ers 'n' see suthin. I ain't hardly been outside o' the gate fer two days. I feel like I hain't seen a livin' bein' but you 'n' pa 'n' ma sence I's borned. Let's go fer a walk, Mariar."

Maud Eliza had come out upon the veranda where Maria stood admiring the roses. The sun was setting, and in the sky beyond the far mountains, pale green clouds floated like shadows down under the sea.

Maria turned absently.

"Well, I don't mind. They ain't nothin' to do here. Ye go 'n' fetch our sun-bunnits while I make sure ma's all right afore leavin' 'er." And Maud Eliza skipped gleefully away.

"Ye hadn't better go down through town," said Ephraim, meeting Maria at the door. "Ole Sammy's got 'er eye on ye. She 's swore to thump ye black 'n' blue the fust time she ketches ye on the street."

"I've been on the street sev'ral times 'n' she ain't thumped me yit," returned Maria.

"That's 'cause she didn't happen to see ye. I heerd this mornin' 't she was layin' fer ye 'n' 't she was tearin' mad 'cause she hain't happend to ketch ye afore now."

"I ain't afeerd o' ole Sammy," said Maria, indifferently.

"She meant it when she said it," persisted Ephraim.

"'N' ye'd better look out. She ain't got over what ye said to 'er the day we come to Havilah, 'n' she 's swore she'll have it out with ye. Ye better take keer."

Maria sniffed contemptuously.

"I don't see what makes ye so keerful o' me all to wunst," she said. "It seems to a-took ye all o' a suddent, like a spasm."

Ephraim looked really troubled.

"If ye was to git into a fight with 'er on the street, d'ye see, it might make a dif'rence with Billy's feelin's towards ye. That 's what I'm afeerd of. Billy's feelin's is very dellycut."

Maria laughed. Her father's selfish solicitude for her was explained.

"I ain't afeerd," she repeated. "I can fight if I have to. 'N' I'm sprier 'n ole Sammy is, any day. Is they anything ye want afore I go, ma?"

"Oh, don't mind me," quavered Mrs. Pugsley, turning her head from side to side in moist languor. "I ain't no 'count. Don't think o' me. I ain't in this 'ere world to be thought of. Nobody ain't proud o' me. Go 'long 'n' don't mind me!"

Maria arranged the blankets carefully, smoothed back her mother's hair with a light hand and pinned a newspaper across the window so that the late sunshine might not enter and fall upon her face. Then Maud Eliza came in with their bonnets, and the two girls set out.

The sunset clouds had deepened and were as rosy as pomegranate blossoms. The wind blew freely down from the foot-hills; it was like a voice and a touch from the clouds.

"I like this," said Maria, with keen enjoyment of the pure air.

"So d' I," said Maud Eliza, "It's a heap better 'n stayin' there in the house ferever. 'Sides," she added with a titter, "they's lots o' men 'bout the saloons at this time o' day. Let's go right through camp!"

"I'd ruther take the path by the river," answered Maria, "we can hear the water there."

"But I don't want to hear the water," persisted Maud Eliza. "I didn't come out to hear water. I want to go through camp. Don't be mean, now. Come on!"

"I sha'n't go that way," declared Maria, stopping.

"O, come on!" urged Maud Eliza, pulling at her dress.

"I sha'n't! I don't want a passel o' men gawpin' at me 'n' makin' remarks. I'll go back if ye won't go by the river."

"It 'ud be a heap better fer all o' us if ye 'd let the men look at ye a little more," said Maud Eliza, not without bitterness.

"Shall we go by the river?" asked Maria, impatiently.

"No, I sha'n't go that way. I come out to see 'n' be seen, 'n' I'm agoin' to do it or know the reason why."

"I'll go back if ye won't go by the river," repeated Maria.

"Go back!" screeched Maud Eliza. "Jes' hear 'er. Go back? Oh, yes, that's a nice excuse to say ye don't like bein' stared at by the men. That's a sweet excuse, that is! I heard what dad was tellin' ye 'bout ole Sammy. Ye're afeerd o' 'er—that's what's the matter o' ye—ye're afeerd o' ole Sammy!"

"I ain't!" cried Maria, flushing at the imputation of cowardice.

"Ye be, too, or else ye'd go straight a-past 'er ole saloon with yer nose in the air. It's jes' what ye orter do to show 'er how much ye think o' her threatenin' ye. It's cowards 't goes sneakin' down back ways 'n' hates to be seen, ye're afeerd o' ole Samanthys!"

"I don't go sneakin' down no back ways, 'n' I ain't afeerd o' fifty ole Samanthys!" flashed back Maria, redder than ever.

"Prove it!" retorted Maud Eliza, following up her ad-

vantage. "Prove it by sailin' straight through camp 'n' past 'er place with colors flyin'!"

"I *will* prove it!" cried Maria, with dilated nostrils. "She hadn't no bizness to threaten me in the fust place. I ain't afeerd o' old Sammy nor ole Harry nor nobody. Come on!"

And they started on again, Maria in advance.

Our actions are the obedient children of our thoughts. From any deed which might bear the construction of cowardice Maria shrunk back, strongly remonstrant; for the unpurposed result of all her training had been to make her able to take care of herself—even to find occasion for demonstrating that ability. At Maud Eliza's taunts she had started up with the fire of a soldier who has a standard to defend; the impulse of the moment was the summary of all the habits of her life. But she had gone only a few steps toward the main part of the camp before she commenced to regret her hasty yielding. Her ideas of true womanliness had been changing of late. She wished she had not noticed Maud Eliza's taunts. But it was too late now to retreat. She could not face her sister's certain ridicule. Besides, old Samantha might not catch sight of her, after all.

They walked on, Maud Eliza, as in duty bound, exercising her tittering powers with vigor. She kept close enough to nudge her sister in the ribs whenever she made an unusually silly remark about "ketchin' a beau." Maria was accustomed to this kitten-like friskiness of her sister, but to-day it annoyed her.

"I wish 't ye'd keep still 'n' behave yerself!" she cried, impatiently. "I hate a gal 't goes snickerin' 'n' snortin' all over the valley!"

But Maud Eliza, having her own views of the quickest and surest way of attracting a beau, paid no attention to this remonstrance. As they approached Sammy's place

Maria acknowledged to herself that her heart was beating a little faster. She was sorry she had come. She had no wish to make a spectacle of herself. Perhaps she dreaded the thought of an encounter more than the encounter itself, for, being in, she was likely to make the opposed aware of her. If there should be a row, Billy would be sure to hear of it—and that Jim Hulse. Billy might justify her in defending herself if she were attacked, but Hulse,—she could imagine the look on his face when he heard of it,—neither laughing nor sneering, but contemptuous. He would look as if she had done something to confirm his idea of women. And that would be unbearable. She did not wish to confirm his idea of women—she wanted to be something unique and impressive in his experience. How she wished she had not come! However, there was yet hope. Old Sammy might see them, and then——

They were almost in front of the saloon now. Maria drew her sun-bonnet over her face and fixed her eyes on the sky in front of her. Maud Eliza was tittering and the men were staring. Maria felt their eyes upon her with a sense of shame. “Come on,” she whispered hurriedly. Something had risen within her which made her resentful of the bold looks of these rough men. Time was when she would have returned their rude stares with interest and taken a coarse pride in “getting even” with a sharp retort. This old spirit had thrilled her at the moment of Maud Eliza’s taunts, but it was all gone now. She held her breath as she passed the saloon door, her heart stopped beating for a moment. They were past now; yes, they were safe for this time—no! There was a rush of heavy feet from the doorway, and Maria felt her arm seized from behind. With a wild palpitating fear, such as she had never known in all her life before, she opened her lips to scream, but she was breathless and could utter

no sound. It was like a hideous nightmare from which she could not awaken.

The clutch on her arm tightened and she felt herself whirled around so as to face the group of men who were grinning at her from the platform in front of the saloon. Then the grasp on her arm relaxed, and she found herself face to face with old Samantha.

After that first breathless gasp, Maria felt cool and equal to the occasion. The old conscious strength returned, and her first thought was to be glad that she had not screamed. She fixed her undismayed eyes on Samantha's face with the boldness of perfect self-confidence.

The giantess was looking inhuman, almost tigerish. There are still unclassified animals in remote corners of the globe; and women who are exceptions to the general rule are met with in society every day. Samantha was an unclassified woman. She could hardly be called either beast or human, but as a hybrid she had somehow come into possession of all the evil qualities of men and brutes.

Maria stared at her without flinching, then glanced down the street with an indifferent air, at the crowd of grinning men, now rapidly increasing, and at the saloon window in which a scorbutic plum-cake figured dismally in proximity to a plate of crummy pastry, bearing the placard in big letters, "ANACONDY DOWNUTS." She noticed Samantha's gurgling baby sprawling contentedly over a beer barrel, and that it wore a dingy white dress with little red spots in it that looked like measles. Then her eyes wandered back to Samantha. The woman was clothed in a faded buff gown which, Maria thought with a dreary sense of her own originality, fitted across her broad hips like an immense blister.

The giantess regarded her victim in gloating silence.

"Well," said Maria, with a slight lifting of her head. "What d'ye want o' me?"

Samantha patted her on the shoulder, leering and nodding.

"I've got suthin' good fer ye," she said with a knowing wink at the increasing crowd.

"Any plums in it?" asked Maria with cool impudence. Samantha glowered at her.

"Plums in it!" she cried, raising her voice and shaking her dishevelled head threateningly, "Don't gimme none o' yer sass, ye hussy! Plums in it? ye'll git suthin' 'sides plums, ye cat! Oh, ye're a purty one, *you* air. He, he!"

By this time the crowd had increased and formed a circle around the two women. The scent of battle must have been in the air, for, men, women, children and dogs came trooping out of the scattered shanties as if conjured up by the wand of an enchanter. The number of human beings crowded into those few hovels was incredible. Havilah was in high glee. At least two weeks had elapsed since the last street-fight between women, and the citizens were beginning to feel the need of excitement. The small boys were particularly jubilant.

"A scrappin'-match, by hen!" howled one, writhing with unholy joy, "Come on, Jimmy, quick! Crawl in atween this 'ere feller's legs if ye want ter see it. My buttons, what a circus?"

"Ladies and gentlemen," preambled old Sammy, placing her immense left hand on her hip and waving her right toward Maria, while she surveyed her audience with the benevolent consciousness of playing an interesting part for their amusement, "that air wooman orter be dead 'n' buried 'thout a coffin!"

This statement did not seem to affect the audience greatly. The citizens of Havilah were too much accustomed to burying people without coffins to perceive anything startling in the allusion. Samantha realized the

disappointment of her beginning and tacked off again on Maria's looks.

"Ye're a purty one, *you* air," she cried with fine scorn, turning again to her victim. "Ye're a fine specimen, *you* air! I'd like a hull case full o' 'em like *you*. Oh, yes, I would!"

The audience tittered appreciatively, but Maria, though her temper was rising, kept silent.

"I reckon ye're mighty proud o' that complexion o' your'n," continued Samantha, "ye'll need a quarter o' beef to poultice it with, though, afore ye say good-bye to *me*. Complexion! Hoo! Lord! If *I* had sech a complexion——"

"But ye hain't," said Maria, keeping her voice steady by a great effort. "Your'n ain't no yallerer 'n the av'rage Missouri female's."

At this everybody laughed and several men clapped their hands as if at a play. Your Californian enjoys an imputation on the climate of Missouri.

For a moment Samantha seemed minded to rush upon her victim and end the battle without further verbal preliminaries, but her tongue as well as her fists had a reputation in Havilah, and she was resolved to sustain both. The fight could keep for a few moments. She had no intention of endangering her reputation as the hardest-mouthed woman in camp, of which she was notoriously proud. She determined to come out victorious in a war of words as well as blows.

Maria had taken off her sun-bonnet, and was holding it in her hands in front of her.

"Lord, look at the mug o' 'er!" shrieked Samantha, throwing up both hands with boisterous laughter. "Jes' look at it! She's tuck off 'er bunnit so 't we can see it better. Oh, ye dear, sweet thing! Lend me yer ear for a palm-leaf fan!"

The frown deepened between Maria's brows.

"If I had *your* face I wouldn't be afeerd o' the biggest bull-dog 't ever walked bow-legged," she said. sullenly.

A roar of merriment rose from the crowd.

"Git there, gals!" shouted one.

"Give it to 'er!" yelled another.

Then arose a Babel of such cries as :

"Fire a rock at 'er!"

"She's a hull house 'n' lot, she is!"

"Hooray fer Pugsley's Mariar!"

"Hooray fer ole Sammy!"

"Sammy 's the lad 't can spin things!"

"Bust the nose o' 'er!"

"Slap the jaws off 'm 'er!"

"Oh, chop on yellin' 'n' let 's hear!"

"Hell ain't fur off 'm Sammy!"

"Hooray! Hooray!"

These indiscriminate cries which coupled her name with that of a notorious woman of the camp, enraged Maria. But she had resolved not to begin the conflict. Presently old Sammy waved her great arm for silence and the cries gradually subsided.

"I'll larn ye to laff at *me*," she resumed, "I'll larn ye what manners is, I'll read the riot act to ye! I tell ye, ladies 'n' gentlemen, she cried, raising her fist and speaking with an air of solemn conviction, "a wooman 't 's up to the tricks o' this 'ere 'un,—her name is *mud*! That's what 't is, *mud*! she'd steal acorns from a blind hog. She'd—Lor', they ain't nothin' a critter like that wouldn't do. Humph! ye're a purty 'un, ain't ye?" she continued, recurring to Maria's looks, which seemed to trouble her more than anything else.

"If I looked like *you*," cried Maria, "I'd want a salary to stay with myself, *I* would."

Renewed cries of "Go it!" and "Hooray!" Maria saw

Samantha's husband among the rest, his little puckered persimmon mouth twisted in wild laughter. Maud Eliza was tittering near a young man. The sight made her sick but she had no thought of retreat.

Thus far the contest of words had been decidedly in Maria's favor. She had spoken less than her adversary but more to the point. This was the kind of oratory which Havilah appreciated. Samantha realized her failure, but still entertained no thought of yielding to another her long-acknowledged supremacy of tongue.

"Ain't she a hard lookin' outfit?" cried the giantess, reverting to her favorite theme. "She's got it into that sweet purty head o' her'n 't she can come aroun' 'ere puttin' on doys much 's she likes with 'er airs 'n' things. But she 'll find she's got to side-track that. I'll show 'er who's who! When I git through with 'er they won't be's much left o' er 's soup on ice! Nobody ever seen *me* mak-in' fun o' a lady as is mindin' 'er own bizness. If I done sech a thing I'd 'spect to be thumped for it soundly. But I never 'd lower myself."

"It's ruther disheartenin' to notice the dif'rence atween some folks 'n' their idees o' themselves," remarked Maria.

"'N' so ye're goin' to git thumped," declared Samantha, rolling up her sleeves and preparing for battle. "'N' I'm the lad 't 's goin' to do it. We've had 'nough o' yer blabbin' 'n' sass, 'n' now we'll try suthin' else. Ye've insulted the wrong un this time, ye flannel-mouthed jade! I'm a goin to smash ye finer 'n' powder."

Maria saw that the time was come. She turned white, but not with fear. The giantess drew back a few steps, flourishing her arms and cursing. Then, pushing her hair back from her eyes, she squared herself in pugilistic fashion and made a frantic lunge at her victim. Maria, however, had kept her eyes on her opponent and exactly at the right moment stepped aside, letting the unwieldy mon-

ster roll past into the crowd which parted before her as before an elephant. Panting with rage at the failure of her first attempt and at the screams of merriment from the bystanders, the woman plunged toward Maria again.

"The Lord hates a coward!" she screeched beside herself with fury. "Lemme git at the hussey—I'll tear 'er liver, I'll chew 'er heart!"

Maria had dropped her bonnet, and was standing with set teeth and tightly-clenched hands. Her blood was up, she could have fought the whole crowd. Anger is the pathmaker of murder, and murder was in Maria's heart at that moment. Her fingers tingled with a mad longing to clutch and tear something that could bleed. Samantha was not more than three feet away, leaning forward and screaming, her venomous face contorted, her rat-like teeth protruding, her hands stretched out with a horrid, grasping movement. Maria felt the answering fury of a fiend in herself but still waited. Suddenly she was conscious of being pushed roughly aside. She turned to grapple with this new assailant, but, as her eyes fell upon his face, her hands dropped helplessly at her side and her white lips uttered a feeble cry. The man had stepped in between her and her antagonist, and with an outstretched hand thrust the giantess back. Maria looked at him only once. It was Jim Hulse. Then she covered her face with her hands, and stood quite still.

Samantha was still cursing and swearing and daring the whole Pugsley family to combat. Something touched Maria's hand. She uncovered her face and looked up bewildered, but did not let her eyes meet Hulse's. He was holding her bonnet toward her.

"Take it, and go home," he said, imperatively.

She took the bonnet, even while she inwardly rebelled.

"Go home," he repeated, seeing that she did not move. She fumbled with her bonnet sullenly.

"I reckon I know 'nough to go home when I git ready," she muttered, keeping her eyes on her hands.

She could not see his face but she felt the fire that leaped into his eyes. It was as if a flash of lightning had cleft the air close to her face.

"For shame!" he cried, taking a step toward her. "Go home at once."

She turned away without another word. He had conquered where old Sammy would have failed.

A yell of disappointment rose from the crowd.

"Shame, shame!" cried several voices.

"Oh, let 'em go it, Hulse!"

"This is a free country, Hulse. Let 'em fight!"

"Come back, Maria, 'n' have it out, ye can lick 'er, I bet!"

Maria neither turned nor noticed. She slunk home as if she had been stripped and beaten in public. So this was the pass to which her conceptions of the necessity and dignity of self-defense had brought her; this the result of her life-long learning in the school of example which had instructed her to champion her cause like a man, this the end of all her recent good resolutions. Hulse had found her fighting on the street and had sent her home like a whipped child. How she hated him for it—how she hated herself!

"I wish I was dead, I do!" she cried with white lips, when she found herself alone under the cottonwoods near home. "Why can't he mind his own bizness 'n' lemme be?" To appear in a street fight was infinitely worse than to show herself in a soiled gown with shoes down at heel or to berate him from her own doorway. "How he must hate me, 'n' how I hate the very thought o' him! I wish't I'd a-died afore I ever set eyes on his face; I do, I do!"

By what power, by what right did that man rule her? She loved freedom and independence, but by no effort of

self-assertion could she believe herself wholly out of bondage as before she met him. It was an entanglement of horoscopes which she could not comprehend, but which made her restive under the decrees of inexorable fate.

Hulse watched her retreating figure with just the shadow of a smile. The crowd was still angry at his interference, and frequent curses were mingled with his name.

"The devil's in Jim Hulse bigger'n a grizzly," shouted someone whom he could not see.

The smile on Hulse's lips deepened.

"The devil is whatever we don't approve of in other people," he said, and walked away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"I've learned a thing or two since I come to Havilah," said Maria, three weeks later as she and Billy sat on their favorite log by the river. "I've learned 't fightin' ain't in a wooman's line. That fracas with ole Sammy settled the bizness fer *me*."

"I never blamed ye," said Billy.

"Oh, I know," she replied, hastily. "'T wa'nt that I was afeered o' yer blamin' me. I knowed ye wouldn't, at the time. I d' know jest what's come over me. It's made my temper quieter, anyhow."

"I've noticed ye've been ruther soberer since then."

"Yes, it sobered me up a heap, that row did. I d' know why. I wouldn't fight with nobody now, 'less 'twas with dad fer 'busin' ma, 'n' I don't reckon I'd half enjoy' that. 'Pears like suthin' inside o' me 'd been a-fightin' *me* lately 'n' had come out on top, 'n' I'd made friends with it 'n' felt better. I ain't what I used to be. It's somehow like I'd been a cryin' 'n' had needed it fer a long time 'thout knowin' it. 'Taint like what I felt when I used to be laffin' so much, but it's better. It's like I'd growed big in my ideas—I d' know what it is!" She shrugged her shoulders impatiently at the failure to analyze her feelings.

"Lor', I don't see nothin' to feel bad about," said Billy. "Ye ain't done nothin' wrong. Ye ain't got nothin' to feel sorry fer."

"Oh, I ain't sorry fer the change in me. That's jes' what I mean. I ain't sorry, 'n' yet I *am*. Anyways, I feel better—like I'd got suthin' I'd been a needin' fer a

long time. 'N' I'll never fight agin 'n' make a show o' myself, never! I reckon that may be what makes me so much more comf'table. I won't be on the lookout fer a chance to fight after this. Only I'm sorry I didn't make up my mind to it sooner."

"I allus admired a gal 't could take care o' herself like a man," said Billy. "A wooman orter be able to do it, out 'ere. Sometimes she has to."

"I didn't have to, that time," replied Maria, with a shake of her head. "I could a-got aroun' it somehow if I'd a-minded to. 'T was all my fault, every bit."

Billy laughed.

"Ye're 's solemn 's a judge," he said. "I hope ye ain't a-goin' to cultivate sorrer jes for a little thing like that. Lor', what's life fer if 't ain't fer a feller to work it fer all they is in it? A sigh gits a sigh fer answer, a laff gits a laff."

"I know—I know," murmured Maria, still shaking her head. "But, they may be other things 'sides laffin' 'n' sighin'. I've 'mos' made up my mind 't life's a hard thing to learn 'bout, Billy."

"Ole Sammy's never tacklèd ye sence then, has she?" asked Billy after a while.

"Oh, no. 'N' I've met 'er lots o' times, face to face. She never looks towards me nor says a word."

"I reckon ye showed 'er ye wa'n't afeerd o' 'er," chuckled Billy.

"I ain't sure 'twas wuth while. She might insult me all she wanted to now, 'n' I'd never notice 'er. 'N' I'd run afore I'd fight."

"Why?" asked Billy.

But she did not answer. Her eyes were fastened meditatively upon the river, and she seemed to be thinking in unison with the sound of it.

"The leaves is all out," she said presently. "Did ye

ever notice what beautiful lights 'n' shadders they is, lookin' up in the cottonwoods when the sun shines like this?—all shades from gold to black. I like to watch 'em, they change so."

Her eyes wandered dreamily from one object to another. Around and above her the varnished leaves of the cottonwoods flashed in the sun, casting shadow-leaves upon the grass. On the farther edge of the valley the looming mountains rose white as quartz ; and the river filled the world with the strong, voluminous sound of rushing water.

Billy sat with a serene, contented smile, as if pleasant thoughts filled the air. Familiarity had only deepened his love for Maria and confirmed his resolution to deserve her. He would win her at last—he was sure of it. She seemed to him no longer a miracle, but a sweet human wonder which he could comprehend, at least in part. She had been very kind to him of late—ever since that night when she had told him that he must wait for her answer. He was content to wait as long as there was hope for him. He would wait forever in the assurance that she might be his at last.

As they sat thus in silence, the sound of a human voice broke in on the deep tones of the river. Two men were passing along the path near the bank. Presently their words became audible.

"I don't reckon they 'mount to much," said a gossiping male voice which Maria had never heard before. "Ole Pugsley hisself 's a ragged lot, anyhow. I've heerd how he 'spects to do suthin' with that oldes' darter o' his'n,—he told it hisself down to Boosey's Place,—'spects to marry 'er to young Bling,—ye know Bling, o' the Shootin' Star claim that promises so big. I d' know how the match 'll come out. She 's a fine-lookin' gal 'nough.

'N' I know myself he s'ports the hull fam'ly—he's bought all their grub ever sence they struck the country."

"Indeed?" responded a languid voice which made Maria start and turn rigid—the voice of Jim Hulse.

"They 're a lazy lot of cattle altogether," continued the garrulous stranger. "The ole man won't work, it's nothin' but laziness ails the ole wooman, 'n' the gals is chips o' the ole block, both o' 'em. Them gals should go to work if they was mine. Now, don't ye reckon they orter, yerself, Hulse?"

"Oh, I suppose so," replied the indifferent voice again. And the subsequent conversation of the two men was lost in the noise of the river.

Maria sprang to her feet and stooped to get a better view of the retreating figures among the cottonwoods. Her lips were parted and her breath came quick, as if she had been frightened. Billy had risen too, and was standing at her side with angry, blazing eyes.

"Who is that man with—*him*?" she asked in a hard, tense voice.

"With Hulse, d' ye mean?" Billy's voice was tremulous with rage.

Maria nodded.

"They call 'im Cowhide Sam. Let go o' my arm till I thrash the life out o' him——"

He moved away from her but she followed, holding tightly to his arm.

"No!" she cried in a tone which made him at once obedient. "I don't want no more fights, Billy. Let 'im go. How d' ye reckon he found out 'bout——"

"I can't tell," he replied, distressed and angry. "I swear to God, Mariar, I never told a livin' bein'—never hinted at it——"

"I know ye didn't," she said. "Mebbe he inquired to the grocery. They's plenty o' people 't feel out o' place

'less they're nosin' into other folks' bizness." She smoothed back her hair nervously. "It don't matter," she added.

"That dirty cuss!" cried Billy, flying into another rage. "To go a pryin' aroun' like that! I never said a word to a livin' soul to make 'em think it. He *must* a gone to the grocery. The sneak! I'll fix 'im yit—see if I don't!"

"No, Billy, don't ye do that. Don't ye see it 'ud only make things wuss? Everybody 'd be talkin', 'n' they's been 'nough talk sence that row with ole Sammy. I don't want no more fightin'. Promise me ye won't tetch 'im nor make a fuss. He was only repeatin' what he'd got a holt of som'ers. Promise ye won't tetch 'im Billy."

"Oh, well, if that 's what ye really want—"

"I reely do. All I'm sorry 'bout is 't he told Hulse. I didn't want *him* to know ye was a s'portin' us. I've allus hated that feller. He has sech a look—I d' know what it's like. All I know is 't I can't bear the sight o' 'im. 'N' we mustn't mind what dad says 'bout our marryin'. That's too foolish. 'N' now I reckon I'll go home. 'Pears like I feel sort o' tired."

At about the same hour of the same day Mr. Ephraim Pugsley sat in close conclave with his wife and Maud Eliza.

"Mariar orter git married," the head of the family was saying. "This 'ere beatin' aroun' the bush don't go. She don't seem to have no idee o' what she 's doin'. She'll lose Billy yit—I know she will. No sensible feller 'll stan' it. 'N' then what 'll 'come o' us, I'd like to know? She orter git married; it's 'er dooty. 'N' she orter do it to wunst."

Ephraim spat a generous quantity of tobacco-juice over the window-sill and nodded at his wife and daughter. Statements like these were easily made, but, without Maria's approval, were of hardly more applicability than a group of scientific facts unsystematized

“Lor’, I’ve been tryin’ to talk that into ’er for ever so long,” remarked Maud Eliza, with a titter of habit rather than of mirth.

“The Swipeses all got husban’s young,” quavered Mrs. Pugsley, using her favorite analogy. “’N’ I don’t see why Maria shouldn’t. She’s a Swipes on ’er mother’s side.”

“Swipes or no Swipes, she orter marry,” declared Ephraim. “She’s old ’nough.”

“Old ’nough!” screeched Maud Eliza, flinging up both hands and snorting. “I should think she *was* old ’nough! She’d orter be ’shamed o’ ’erself—I’m sure I’d be if I ’s her. Old ’nough! W’y she’s gittin’ to be a reg’lar ole maid; she’s more ’n two year older ’n I be! I jes’ wish’t I had her chance. I’d show ye a thing or two ’t ’ud make yer eyes peel!”

“W’y, *you* ’d marry to wunst ’n’ no monkeyin’,” said Ephraim, expectorating again.

“Wouldn’t I?” cried Maud Eliza, with a horse laugh.

“Sensible gal!” said the approving father.

“Maud Elizy was allus more o’ a Swipes ’n what Mariar was,” put in Mrs. Pugsley. “Mariar’s a good ’nough gal—she’s allus waited on me the best she knowed how, though sometimes it seems like she might a-done suthin’ more for my side when it was achin’ fit to split off: but she ain’t got no style; Maud Elizy’s got all the style o’ the fam’ly. She’s all Swipes, Mariar don’t seem to take after nobody in partic’lar.”

“I wish ’t she’d take after Billy Bling in partic’lar,” said Ephraim.

“So d’I,” said Maud Eliza, “It’s time she was out o’ the way. I’ll have lots better chances to ketch a feller when she’s gone. All the men go a gaddin’ after her, ’n’ won’t look at nobody else while she’s aroun’. ’N’ she jes’ don’t

see 'em or seem to know what they're after. It makes me mad! Why can't she freeze onto Billy 'n' be done with it, I'd like to know? What do the men see in 'er, anyhow, I wonder? She ain't lively,—she don't hardly ever laff now-days,—she's a heap soberer 'n what she used to be. I can't understan' it, for that 's what the men likes, is laffin'."

"That's what I've allus said," declared Mrs. Pugsley, raising herself on her elbow and looking interested. "I was allus laffin' fit to kill when I was a gal, 'n' I had lots o' beaux—hull caboodles o' 'em. They tagged me all over the kentry 'n' wouldn't gimme no peace o' my life. I'm proud o' ye, Maud Elizy. Ye take after the Swipeses. Stick to yer laffin' if ye want to ketch a man."

She sank back on her blankets with an air of mingled dampness and maternal pride.

"Mariar's idees is so queer," continued Mr. Pugsley. "She don't seem to see things the way they be. She's too hard-headed. She don't think o' the dooty she owes 'er family. She orter think o' that."

"Course she orter," assented Maud Eliza.

"Billy's one o' the fines' fellers in this 'ere hull camp, too, not mentionin' that Shootin' Star claim o' his which is pannin' out wonderful. Anybody 'll tell ye that. He's good-natered 'n' easy, 'n' wouldn't be hard on his wife's relations. That's where the beauty o' Billy Bling lays—he wouldn't be hard on his wife's relations. He'd take care o' 'em 's tender 's if they was little kids, or suthin' brittle. He'd give 'em—or leastways the male part o' 'em—a little salary fer—fer expenses. That's jes' his style. I can't see why Mariar keeps a-waitin' 'n' a-waitin'. It can't be she keers fer no other feller."

Maud Eliza shook her head emphatically.

"It ain't no other feller, dad. I know what it is—it's

jest to spite me. I am completely disgusted with Mariar."

" 'N' Billy's prospects is 'way-up. He'll be one o' the richest men in the State some day. When things reely git agoin' right, his claim 'll turn out millions."

"A man like that is worthy o' a Swipes," remarked Mrs. Pugsley. "'N' I hope if she ketches 'im she'll live like a Swipes 'n' not get to be a low, no 'count critter 't nobody takes pride in 'n' ain't got nothin' to the side o' 'er but a pain. Maud Elizy, ye'll have to git me a new stickin' plaster. I thort I could do 'thout it, but I'm afeerd I can't."

"I like success wherever I find it," continued Ephraim. "It's allus safe to hitch onto a successful man; he's sure to pull ye som'ers 'n' land ye higher 'n what ye was afore. 'N' Billy's a successful man, 'n' I love 'im 'n' admire 'im 'n' I want 'im fer a son-in-law; 'n' if we can only fetch Mariar to time, our troubles 'll all be over."

But appreciation of success by no means constitutes success. The river Alpheus reflected many an Olympic victor in olden times, and gained never a bit of force by so doing.

Mr. Pugsley, though professing to be greatly disappointed at his prolonged failure to get work, had found life at Havilah just what he had always found it in other places, — a period of thriftless idleness, antecedent to some great good luck which was sure to turn up in a few days. He seemed to have regulated his conduct according to the principles of a triune laziness which might be formulated as follows: The less I have to do, the less I want to do; the more I have to do, the less I want to do; so the only course left open to me is to do as little as I can. This mode of existence had seemed especially satisfactory of late, inasmuch as Mr. Pugsley's amorphous good luck seemed likely to be crystallized very

soon in Maria's marriage, and meanwhile Billy provided the family with everything necessary, showing at the same time a beautiful willingness to continue his generosity indefinitely.

To Mr. Pugsley's grief and surprise Maria came in on this particular afternoon and declared with considerable emphasis that she was tired of living on charity and that not another mouthful of provision bought with Billy's money should ever enter that door again.

"I've only put up with it so long," she declared, "because I've been thinkin' every day ye might git suthin' to do. But I know well 'nough ye don't half try. If ye ask for work at all, ye keep prayin' all the time inside o' ye 't ye won't get it. Ye jest set aroun' the saloons from mornin' till night, waitin' to git treated, 'n' soakin' up the whiskey like ye was a sponge. I shan't put up with it no longer. Ye can go to work or starve along o' the rest o' us—so there!"

"But I thought it was understood—" began Ephraim with wide open eyes.

"Ye thort it was understood we was allus a goin' travelin' in style 'cause we had a free hoss to ride? Oh! ye thort that, did ye? Well! ye'll find out dif'rent. We've had enough o' this. Billy's offered ye work, honest 'n' honorable, at good wages, if 't is hard, ye can dig 's well 's the next 'un, if ye've a mind to—they ain't a tougher ole bone nowheres outside o' a nigger's skull 'n what you be, all over. 'N' if ye won't do it, w'y—" Maria nodded her head with awful meaning, and after a moment added:

"I wish't I was a man! I'd show ye what a man can do. I wouldn't sponge; I'd work!"

Mr. Pugsley felt that the time for prompt action had come. He edged toward the door with two definite purposes in view,—to say what he had to say and to dodge the consequences by precipitate flight if necessary. He

had never wholly forgotten his plan of utilizing his daughters' labor as a means of increasing his income, but Billy's generosity had thus far made any reference to the matter unnecessary. But now he must act. Anything, even Maria's anger, was preferable to daily labor with pick and shovel, and Maria's last words had paved the way for what he wanted to say. If she liked to see people work, by hokey! she should have the chance to try it herself. He reached the open doorway and stood there a-tilt on one leg, watchful, meditative and calculating.

"Wimmin sometimes works," he said, cautiously.

"Well, 'n' don't I work?" cried Maria, hotly. "Who gits yer grub 'n' washes yer dirty duds 'n' builds the fires, I'd like to know? If ye done half 's much 's I do, we wouldn't a-had to live on charity, with folks talkin' 'bout it in the streets 'n' all over the woods. Dad," she cried, with a sudden vehement earnestness, "what is they here 't a gal can do to earn money 'n' make 'erself independent? I'll work my fingers to the bone afore I'll let this 'ere thing go on. I won't be dependent on nobody!" She leaned toward him, her voice piteous, as if pleading for help from danger.

Ephraim heaved a long, relieved sigh.

"That's what I got up to say to ye," he said, resuming his seat by the window. "'N' now 't ye're ready to hear it, I'll tell ye what I think. Ye're a strong gal, Mariar; ye admit that much?"

"Yes."

"So's Maud Elizy."

"Yes."

"Well! Some wimmin takes in washin' 'n' makes miners' wages at it. That's what I had to say."

He crossed his legs and expectorated over the window-sill.

Maria went to the door and looked out toward the river. The young dancing leaves turned the sunbeams from green to silver, from silver to green, as the wind passed, and the sound of the river was like the voice of a friend. Far off the pines lay along the mountains like the shadows of resting clouds. Her eyes fastened upon them mechanically. What her thoughts were Ephraim could not guess. It was enough for him to know that she was not angry.

The day passed as usual. Maria spent the rest of the afternoon at home, and when Ephraim returned from Boosey's in the semi-gloom of the sweet spring evening, he discovered, tacked to the side of the house under the old veranda, a strip of white muslin, bearing in ill-shaped, straggling letters the words, "CITTY LONDRY," and Maria herself stood in the doorway smiling as he had never seen her smile before, but with something in her look that forbade him to speak a word. She had gone through a struggle with her pride which none could have comprehended but herself.

Ephraim sat down at table in silence and she heaped his plate full; then, without a word, she left the house, and he saw her disappear among the shivering cotton-woods by the river.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BILLY did not come down to camp after this for three whole days, not because he had any especial reason for staying away, but it seemed good to look forward to meeting Maria after a long absence—it seemed tremendously long to him—as an accumulated joy worthy of much self-denial, as a sort of laying-up of spiritual treasures on earth with the certainty of enjoying them in heaven. There was something very pleasant in the belief that his absence would make her think of him and wonder why he stayed away.

Sometimes at intervals of his work he amused himself by wondering if his thoughts, going down to her in the valley, should meet hers coming up to him, what they would say to each other. He half believed that they actually had met thus more than once, that he had often conversed with her, though out of sight and hearing. It is an old belief with lovers—perhaps an intuition—that love bridges space and time, and lets thought pass freely across the chasm of the universe.

But now, whistling gayly, Billy passed under the cottonwoods which grew around the Pugsley cabin. The branches seemed beckoning him to play, he thought, as when he was a boy. Close by the path leading from the gate to the veranda a little fig-tree, which he had planted two years before, lifted its clear emerald candelabra toward him as he passed, and a weeping willow poured into the air a shower of pale green spray, like some marvelous fountain of Arabian romance. And the roses, ah! the roses that hung from the rude old porch, how

they crowded and pushed and jostled to get into the sunshine, and how the bees, rose-cradled, worked and hummed and fell into a trance of delicious slumber when the wind rocked them just right !

“ Mariar likes sech things,” Billy thought, ascending the steps lightly. “ How queer ’t I planted the roses fer her ’thout knowin’ it ! ”

Then he looked up and saw the strip of white muslin on the side of the house. He stopped short and stared at it several moments before he could comprehend its full meaning.

“ It’s that Cowhide Sam’s doin’s,” he muttered. “ It’s what she heerd him say to Jim Hulse ’t ’s drove her to it.”

He cast a sweeping glance around the yard. A big washing was strung out on the lines to dry.

“ She ain’t a-goin’ to do that sort o’ bizness if I can help it,” he declared to himself as he knocked at the door. “ She’s too good fer it. Lord, to think o’ the money I’ve got, ’n’ her takin’ in washin’ ? ”

Maria herself came to the door, smiling, but looking flushed and tired.

“ Come in, come in ! ” she cried, heartily. “ Ye better interduce yerself, seems to me, ye’re sech a stranger. La ! I ain’t seen ye fer a coon’s age ! Where ye been keepin’ yerself ? Take a seat ’n’ set down.”

Her greeting was unusually cordial, and she was unfeignedly glad to see him. She held out her hand and he took it gently, almost reverently, keeping his eyes fixed upon her face.

“ I’d ruther not come in this afternoon, if ye don’t mind,” he said. “ It’s so pleasant I’d ruther be outside. Wouldn’t ye like to put on yer bunnit ’n’ go fer a little walk ? We can take it slow,” he added, fearing she might say she was too tired, “ ’n’ we needn’t go fur.”

She went for her bonnet without replying, and he

thought she moved wearily. Presently she stood beside him again.

"Seems like I never seen the roses so thick," he said, pulling a big cluster as they descended the veranda steps.

"Ye like sech things don't ye, Mariar?"

"Oh, yes!" was the quick answer:

"Take these, then," said he, handing her the flowers, "'n' stick 'em under yer chin, through the buttonhole there. Ay, that' looks fine agin the white skin o' yer throat! We'd better walk by the river where it's level, hadn't we?"

"We allus walk by the river! I've been there with ye a thousan' times."

"'N' I hope 'll go there with me a thousan' times more! Would ye ruther go som'ers else?"

"Oh, I ain't partic'lar—anywheres 'll do."

"I thought ye looked too tired to go up towards the foothills."

"Oh, I ain't tired," she answered. "Leastways, not so very. Come to think, I'd ruther go up to the foothills. They's jes' time for a good climb afore sunset. I've been in the house all day. I'd like to git up high—where I can look down on folks," she added, with that mirthless little laugh he had noticed when she was not quite herself.

"I don't think ye orter," objected Billy. "Ye look dead tired 'n' all done up. I wish 't ye'd go by the river."

She did not answer, but preceded him in the path which led toward the foothills.

"Oh, well, all right!" he said. "But mind, ye can't look down on *me* if I stay along o' ye!"

He caught up with her and walked at her side in the heavy grass. He wanted to be where he could look into her face and study the meaning of her eyes and lips. It is as natural for us to stand close to those who nourish

our spiritual needs as for rushes to grow by the water.

Into the cool dark gulch they passed, with the shadows thick around them. Here where the sunbeams penetrated for but an hour or two during the day, the belated buds of the willow were spreading their tiny wings as if for flight, and the little cottonwood leaves seemed always reaching toward each other in a vain endeavor to shake hands. Wild roses, as sweet as only California roses in March can be, had pushed back their green calyxes and were peeping out into the late spring world.

"Let us rest here," said Billy as they reached a shelving rock beside the path. "I know ye mus' be tired. Come, set down here beside me. W'y, yer face is flushed red 'n' yer breath comes short! What a brute I be, not to a-noticed sooner!"

She did not resist as he drew her down upon the rock at his side.

"Mariar," he began at once with great earnestness, "I want ye to tell me suthin'—suthin' 't I orter know."

"'Bout myself?"

"Yes, 'bout yerself."

"Well, what is it? I ain't promised to answer, ye know."

He rose and stood before her so that she could not hide her face.

"I want to know why ye've decided all o' a sudden to work like this—to take in washin'."

She laughed somewhat harshly.

"Oh, is that all?" she said.

She picked up a loose stone and sent it rolling down the path.

"W'y, I reckon ye orter be able to answer that question fer yerself, Billy. Ye was along o' me 'n' heerd what that Cowhide Sam said."

She loosened another stone with her foot and watched it bound down the mountain side.

“What he said to that Hulse,” she added after a moment.

“But it don’t signify ’t ye’re goin’ to work yerself to death jes’ ’cause a stranger spoke like that!” cried Billy.

“I won’t work myself to death,” was her response. “I couldn’t if I tried. Ye don’t know how tough I be.”

“But, Mariar——”

She turned on him fiercely.

“D’ye reckon I’m goin’ to live on charity ’n’ have folks lookin’ down on me when I’m able to work ’n’ take care o’ myself?” she cried. Then in a suddenly softened tone,

“I know ye mean all right, Billy, ’n’ ye don’t look at it as charity. But other folks does ’n’ so do I. I never reely thought o’ it afore, but now—I can’t—I can’t somehow bear to be beholden to ye.”

“But, Mariar, yer father’s plans——”

She arose with a movement of her shoulders as if casting off a heavy load.

“My father don’t plan fer me,” she said, coldly. “I’m able to earn ’nough fer ma’s wants, ’n’ that’s the main thing. I won’t take charity from nobody.”

She moved on up the mountain side and he was obliged to follow.

“It’s only a little ways up to the top from here,” she said. “Let’s hurry or the sun ’ll be down.”

They climbed the steep ascent to the summit from which the valley was spread out below them like a map. Standing together in silence, they looked down with that sense of incorporeal power which, when gazing from a height, merges one’s thoughts and emotions into a consciousness of regnant force and spiritual overlordship.

They seemed alone together above the broken, receding world. Almost unconsciously Billy took her hand and she yielded it to him without noticing.

Presently she drew away and seated herself on the top-most rock.

"I am cold," she said with a shiver.

He took off his miner's jacket and wrapped it tenderly around her shoulders.

"We'd better go back," he said.

"Not yit," she answered. "I want to think."

Her eyes wandered away to the far mountains which were covered with snow as with a cloak of ermine. Billy seated himself at her side, devouring the look of her wrapt, unconscious face.

"Mariar," said he at last, very softly, half fearing to break in upon her meditations.

"Well?" she answered without taking her eyes from the horizon.

"Look *at* me," he said.

She turned her eyes toward him with the mechanical obedience of one half-awakened from a dream.

"Well?" she repeated.

He moved closer to her.

"I want ye to give up this wild idee o' your'n," he said, appealingly. "What bizness 'as sech a gal as you be to work like a common woman?"

She smiled bitterly.

"I should think ye would a-found out by this time 't I ain't no better 'n the common run. They was a time when I wouldn't a-done it 'n' wouldn't a-cared who bought the vittles, jes' so I got my share. But it ain't like that now. Lord! what's the use o' longin' to go idle when everything shows 't we was made to work? Life without work 's like a steam-engine with the fires out 'n' nothin' in the biler."

She spoke with superficial cheerfulness. Billy listened to her quietly but without understanding a word.

"I want ye to let me keer fer ye, allus," he said, when she had finished. "Ye said I might speak to ye agin sometime, 'n' 'pears like I can't wait no longer. I've got money 'nough fer both o' us 'n' to spare. 'N' I love ye honest 'n' true. They's nothin' I wouldn't do to make ye happy; no sufferin' I wouldn't go through, no trouble nor sickness if 't would bring a good to ye; 'n' I only want the chance to prove my words. Will ye marry me, Mariar?"

She shrunk away from him a little, but did not answer. Her eyes met his, almost frightened.

"I love ye," he repeated, putting his arm around her beseechingly, protectingly. "See how my heart beats ag'in' ye—look at me—ye mus' know it. I'd die to make ye happy—I'd—" he paused suddenly, as if ashamed of his growing earnestness. "I'd treat ye as the wooman I love orter be treated,—as the best 'n' loveliest wooman in the world orter be treated. Ye needn't work no more, dear—never, 'n' yer folks shall be comf'table, too. I've got 'nough fer all o' us."

She let her head rest against him for a moment; now she drew away, but kept her eyes fastened upon his as if reading the bared tablets of his soul.

"I ain't worthy o' ye, Billy," she cried with sudden vehemence, turning her eyes away. He was about to reassure her with words of affectionate protest when she pushed him away from her, shivering. Then she looked at him once more.

"I don't want ye to misunderstan' me," she cried, with a flash. "I'm a decent wooman—a honest wooman; it ain't that. In that way I'm good 'nough fer any man—fer *any* man—d'ye hear?" Her voice rose to a shrill cry of passionate self-assertion, and then she shook her head

as if recollecting herself and went on in a milder tone :
“ But they’s other things—they’s other things. I don’t want to talk of it no more, now. Wait ! ”

He looked at her piteously.

“ That’s what ye said afore,” he returned. “ Must it *allus* be wait ? Must I *allus*——”

She drew his coat around her with a shiver.

“ It’s cold here,” she said. “ I felt it when I fust come up. ‘N’ I think I *am* tired, after all. That was a big washin’ of ole Dr. Pilledabber’s—the biggest I ever seen. They’ve got no end o’ brats, them Pilledabbers. I had fourteen gingham aperns. But he’s good pay—he’s good pay. Don’t talk ‘bout it no more now, Billy. Wait—wait ! ”

In silence they passed down the mountain side together. The sun was setting, and there was something fiercely gorgeous in the jumbled colors of the western sky. The trees caught flakes of red light on their branches like pomegranate blossoms, and down in the valley the river flared like a moving conflagration.

“ We orter a-gone sooner,” muttered Maria, still shivering.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ONE Sunday afternoon Jim Hulse sat in his open doorway gazing out absently into the valley. It was known of him that his opinions were strongly atheistic, and yet he had been heard to utter Christ's name with reverence, and he had never been seen at work on Sunday. A book lay on his knee which he had evidently just finished. It was *Romola*. The book was open at the fly-leaf on which these words had just been penciled in a firm, uncial hand :

“The creative faculty is the nearest approach of man to God, of the finite to the Infinite. For the mighty few whom we call geniuses is reserved the glorious assurance that they have had some share in moulding the beliefs and actions of humanity after the pattern of all good. It is a tremendous thing to bring beauty out of ugliness, order out of chaos, and earnestness out of indifference.”

This man who, like Layamon of old, “read books,” had arranged his library on a long shelf above the table where the familiar gilt titles could look down at him as he sat at his meals. There were a few works of science, several histories, and some of the best novels. But most of the volumes were poetry. “Il est plus aisé de connoître l'homme en général que de connoître un homme en particulier,” says La Rochefoucauld ; and we may believe that the linking together of impressions which had shaped Jim Hulse's preference for the literature of sentiment, had been as mysterious as the exceptional events that had moulded his life into its present arbitrary configuration.

Most of Hulse's books bore an inscription in the same

spirit as the one he had just penciled on the fly-leaf of *Romola*. It was his habit to epitomize his impressions, to sum up an author, and, so to speak, run a pin through him as a means of holding him fast in his collection of psychological specimens. The reader may not be unwilling to examine a few of these summaries.

In a volume of society verses was written: "This is one of the many poets whose voices quaver into momentary prominence and then are heard no more."

"Rosetti, in his admiration for the beautiful, not only twines the frame of his lyre with flowers, but the strings also."

Swinburne: "A disciple of fever and ague."

Tennyson's *In Memoriam*: "A pretty shroud, manufactured by one who has original ideas in funereal tucks and ruffles."

Longfellow: "The land of song is the broadest of all; its boundaries are the viewless limits of the human heart. Poetry is life not as it is, but as it should be."

Chatterton: "Few stars touch the zenith. Nay, all stars touch the zenith of some place."

Chaucer: "These Songs of Eld flow refreshingly through the present like a clear, cold stream through a barren country. Truly, old books have young life in them."

Walt Whitman: "A cow, strayed into the garden of poesy!"

"Shakespeare in his art stands like these mountains, eternal and alone."

"Shelley's thoughts fly from him wild and free, created as God created the birds of the sky."

On a novel by George Sand was scribbled: "Marriage, like moonlight, is perfect in an ideal sense, but faulty for the practical uses of life."

One classical work was visible—a worn copy of the

Iliad in Greek, in which was written: "Were we all gods like the gods of old, what a gloom we would make of life's glory!" And underneath, apparently as a bitter afterthought, "One need be but a common mortal to do as much as that."

Hulse leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head and his long legs extended. Just outside the door stood a wild plum-tree in full blossom; the sound of bees among its branches rose dreamily, palpitatingly, like genial warmth from a sunny place. Out in the valley he could see straying cattle, and he imagined the fragrance their heavy feet crushed from the sweet wild flowers. A few tame doves circled above the cabin and settled lightly upon the roof and about the yard-like enclosure. The rivulet flowed past with a quiet hymn for the rare bright Sabbath.

"No wonder the Romans heard spirit voices in the sound of running water," thought Hulse.

He was aroused from his musings by the appearance of two figures, a man and a woman, advancing slowly through the rocky opening of the enclosure. He regarded them with displeasure and surprise. They were Billy and Maria. The girl was walking a little behind her companion, looking half timidly, half defiantly over his shoulder. Hulse's face darkened. He arose and stood in the doorway as if to bar them out.

"Well!" he said, when they had stopped quite close to him. After the first quick glance his features had settled into the mask-like indifference which was so strongly at variance with the phosphorescent gleam of his eyes.

Billy laughed.

"Why, Hulse," he said, "ye must a-had a row with them books o' your'n to treat callers like this. This 'ere's Mariar. Ye've seen 'er afore—wunst at her own house 'n' wunst on the street. Ye orter 'member."

"I don't remember," was the curt answer.

Billy's eyes opened very wide.

"W'y—y," he began, prolonging his vowel the better to express his surprise, "'don't ye 'member—w'y, ye *must* 'member,—how ye parted her 'n' ole Sammy—how she give ye Hail Columby from the porch——"

"Ye needn't 'mind him o' meetin' me," interrupted Maria. "I'm sure I ain't got no wish to 'member, nuther."

"Ah, that was Maria, was it?" asked Hulse.

"Queer 't ye couldn't 'member," said Billy.

"Very queer," was Hulse's answer.

"Would ye mind gittin' out o' the door 'n' lettin' the lady set down?" inquired Billy. "We've had a long walk 'n' she's tired. It was my doin's 't she stopped—she didn't want to 'n' wouldn't fer a long time. I fetched 'er in to rest a minute 'n' git a drink afore we started back to Havilah."

"I suppose she can sit down," said Hulse, ungraciously. He left the door, picked up the volume which he had laid on his chair, and then motioned her to the seat. "I don't receive callers, especially women. You know that, Bling."

"I know 't ye've allus acted like a white man when I've been here afore," said Billy, with considerable heat.

Hulse smiled—the smile which no one liked.

"Pray sit down, Miss—Miss Maria," he said, pushing the chair toward her.

"I don't want to set down," said Maria, sullenly.

"Shall we go on 'n' I come back 'n' settle with 'im afterwards?" cried Billy in open anger.

"I didn't want to come," muttered Maria. "'Twa'n't none o' my doin's, Mr. Hulse. I want ye to understan' that."

"I beg you, Miss—Miss Maria, be seated." The smile

on Hulse's face deepened as she took the chair reluctantly, keeping her face lowered from his while her hands fumbled with her apron.

She was rapidly debating with herself what it was best to do. If she left the cabin in wrath, Billy would be sure to avenge the discourtesy which had driven her forth, and blows, if not bloodshed, would follow. Good-natured as he was he would hesitate at nothing where her honor was concerned. She reddened with vexation and wounded pride, yet was driven by fear to acquiesce in a hateful position. But quarrel there should be none if she could avoid it. Better suffer for a little while the pangs of wounded egotism than the retributive justice of knowing that she had endangered Billy's life or,—she admitted the fact to herself with resentful anger,—the life of this man whose assumption of sovereignty was destined for her abasement.

“So your name is Maria,” Hulse said, after a silence which had lasted longer, she thought, than she could bear.

“Yes,” she replied, faintly. She wondered if he realized how completely she felt in his power.

“An ugly name. I've always hated the name of Maria.”

She flashed a quick glance at him as if to deny that she cared for his disapproval, but as his eyes met hers she felt her lids contracting as before a glaring light; then she said with strained acquiescence:

“It is a ugly name. I've allus hated it myself.”

There was another trying pause.

“You need not mind the ugliness of it,” he said finally “what's in a name? You may not be aware of the fact, but the Greeks called July the month of Hecatombæon, and yet they were a happy people.”

Maria did not like his tone and found herself trying to disentangle his meaning from his manner of utterance,

but failed. He intended to sneer at her. She hoped that Billy noticed nothing but the bare incomprehensible words.

"I reckon ye git that way o' talkin' out o' yer books," she said, weakly. "I don't reckon I'd like yer books," she added, almost haughtily.

Hulse regarded her with half-shut eyes through which the flame gleamed.

"You are honest, at any rate," he said, slowly.

She did not look at him but sat quite still, except for a slight muscular movement of her arms and shoulders, as if she were straining at unseen cords.

"I know I shouldn't enjoy yer books if they made me like *you*!" She would not yield to him. Her words were independent enough, full enough of self-assertion, but there was a false ring of bravado in them which she recognized helplessly.

"Ay, you are honest," repeated Hulse.

"And *you* are—" she began with a desperate determination to fling off the nightmare of power he wielded over her, but he interrupted her with an *adagio* drawl:

"Ah, don't try to tell me what I am. You don't know—you can't have the least idea. I may be guilty of a poem—did you notice my library? or of the unconventional love of Don Carlos for his mother. Who can tell? Or, I may be a murderer, since murderers are as plentiful in California as Doctors of Divinity in New England."

Billy, who had several times been on the point of interposing and had been as often waved off by Maria, came forward, very white about the lips, and said:

"Hain't ye had 'nough o' his jeerin' yit, Mariar? Let's gonow. Come! I'll settle it with him to-morrer."

"I don't see 't they's anything to settle," she muttered, still plucking at her apron.

"I'll settle it with him to-morrer," was Billy's quiet iteration.

Maria turned from him to Hulse.

"I wish 't we hadn't come here!" she cried, with a despairing movement of her hands which was like an appeal for help.

In the strained condition of affairs she forgot for the time the rebellious serfdom to which Hulse's presence always subjected her, and thought only of the danger of allowing Billy to leave the place in anger. The urgent need of action loosened the bonds of self-consciousness and she was free again. Hulse's mastery over her was but a mastery of her imagination; freed from this she could act with independence in the line of duty. She could meet him as an equal by forgetting herself. A quick resolve flashed into her mind, and in carrying it out she arose superior to his extortionate demands upon her obedience.

"Billy," she cried, suddenly "ye've forgot the drink o' water we came for. I'm thirsty."

Billy took down a tin cup which hung under the little square window and went out to the brook.

Maria turned to Hulse with a slight lifting of her head. A change in her face expressed the subsidence of self-assertion, but her glance was freighted with an overmastering, unselfish fear.

"I don't want ye 'n' Billy to fight," she said in a passionate, eager tone. "'N' that's what it'll come to. I know it. Don't ye see how mad he is!"

"Does he want to fight?" asked Hulse, with his eyes upon her.

"He'll insist on it—I know him so well! ye know him yerself. I want ye to make it right with him."

"Make it right with him?"

"Yes. Tell him ye hain't meant nothin' by what ye've said 'n' done."

"And why should I do that?"

“For yer own sake.”

Hulse smiled curiously.

“He cannot harm me,” he said.

“If he fights with ye it means—death!”

“Death?” Hulse’s tone was bitterly sarcastic.

“Death to one or both!”

“He cannot harm me,” repeated Hulse.

“Fer my sake, then!”

“How will our quarreling harm you?”

She met his glance quite frankly.

“Billy loves me,” she said, simply.

“And you——”

“I care more fer ’im ’n I can find words to tell. He’s the best, the only friend I’ve got in all the world. Ye know how such quarrels end here. ’N’ I don’t want no blood spilt—his’n nor your’n.” She shivered.

Hulse was regarding her with narrowed eyes. But Billy’s entrance at this moment put an end to further speech on either side.

“Here’s the water, Mariar,” said Billy, holding the cup toward her.

She did not speak nor move nor take her eyes from Hulse’s face. She did not seem to breathe.

“See!” repeated Billy, touching her hand with the cold tin.

“I don’t want the water!” she cried roughly, drawing away. “I ain’t thirsty—now.”

“W’y—” began Billy.

“I don’t want it, I say!” she repeated in a high, angry voice, pushing the cup from her and spilling its contents on the floor. “I don’t want it ’n’ I won’t have it!”

Billy shook out the few remaining drops and hung the cup on its nail under the window; then he stood with compressed lips, waiting her next movement. She was still looking at Hulse, who was smiling sarcastically.

Was he indifferent to her anxiety, or was he enjoying it ?

In any case, she could endure the strain of his presence no longer. She turned to Billy with a passionate low cry.

"Take me away!" she breathed, grasping his arm and drawing him toward the door.

Billy loosened her hand very gently and pushed her a little to one side, holding her hand in his.

"I'll go in a minute," he said, in a hard, quiet tone. "But fust I want to know what he's been sayin' to ye while I was out there fer the water. If he's said anything—"

"I have said nothing immodest," interrupted Hulse, with his slow smile.

Again Maria tried to draw Billy toward the door, and again he held her gently back.

"Has he said anything to ye, Mariar, 't ain't straight 'n' fair?"

"No—no—nothin', on my word, Billy. Come away! See, it's gittin' late, 'n' they's a long walk afore us. Come!"

Billy's face relaxed somewhat.

"I didn't think it o' Hulse 't he'd openly insult a lady," he said. "But they's suthin' wrong—they's suthin' wrong. I can't rightly make out what 'tis jes' now, but—I'll come back 'n' settle this biz'ness with ye to-morrer, Hulse. I don't fight in the presence o' ladies."

"As you like!" was the imperturbable answer.

"Let us go!" pleaded Maria.

Billy held her back so that he faced Hulse squarely. His blue eyes flashed like steel.

"I can't make out the meanin' o' most o' what ye've said to-day, Hulse, so 't I can't bear no grudge ag'in' yer naked words. I ain't much on dictionary slang, nohow; but I've got feelin's the same as you, 'n' so has Mariar; 'n' I tell ye plainly ye need a lesson in manners. The

tone o' yer voice needs cultivatin', 'n' to-morrer I'll come up 'n' give ye a lesson. Come, Mariar, we'll go now."

But Hulse stepped in between them and the door so that they could not pass. Maria felt as if an iron hand were at her throat. She could not move for the nightmare of fear that benumbed her. Was the fight to take place now, in her presence?

"Bling," said Hulse in his colorless tone, "have you any reason to believe that I am a coward?"

"No," replied Billy with ready generosity, "I know ye're a brave man. I've seen ye venture yer life where the bravest would a-faltered. I 'member up there to the American Mine—"

Hulse lifted his hand in languid protest.

"No matter. Do you believe I would fail to meet you to-morrow through fear?"

"No. I hain't no reason to think so."

"And yet I shall not meet you."

He glanced carelessly toward Maria, who was leaning forward as if to catch the words before they left his lips.

"Billy," said Hulse, holding out both hands, "I have no wish to quarrel with you. We have been comrades here a long time, and I like you as much as I am capable of liking any man. Why should it not continue? If my behavior to-day has displeased you I am sorry, and I can excuse myself only by asking you to remember what you have often said to my face—that I am a queer, incalculable man. You know some people call me insane." His voice, which had till now been as regular and monotonous as if repeating a mathematical formula—Maria wondered how such genuine words could be uttered in such an indifferent tone—became charged with momentary feeling, "and sometimes I half believe they are right. I have no wish to quarrel with you, Billy. The fault has been mine. Let us be friends."

Billy yielded his hands, but did not return the pressure of the other.

“The offense is ag’in’ Mariar,” he said in a softened tone. “I’ll let her speak fer me.”

There was a mist before her eyes as she answered in a quick, agitated voice :

“Then I say, by all means be friends.” And she laughed almost hysterically.

The two men shook hands in silence.

“And now you are at liberty to finish your idyl in your own good time and way,” said Hulse. “And since we are good friends again, let me give you a word of advice : if you care for each other—and I suppose you think you do—don’t be too much together. You’ll find that absence exalts more than merit. Take allopathic doses of separation ; they are the best preventive of contempt !”

“Come,” said Maria, drawing her arm through Billy’s, “let’s go now.” Hulse seemed determined to be derisive till the last, and she feared that Billy’s half-appeased resentment might be roused again. She felt thankful for a great deliverance and longed to hurry away lest it be withdrawn. She pulled Billy after her through the door, and Hulse followed a little way behind. At sight of him the flock of doves fell like masses of snow from the roof to his feet. Maria looked back once after she had passed the opening in the rocks which led to the cabin and saw that the birds had settled upon his head and shoulders and extended arms. He was holding one close to his face and smoothing its snowy plumage with caressing fingers.

“I never seen Hulse act so nasty afore,” muttered Billy after a long silence. “I had no idee a human critter could put sech a vile sound into his voice.”

“But it’s all right now,” said Maria, eager that Billy should feel quite satisfied.

"Oh, I reckon so. I 'most wish it wa'n't, he acted so d—n mean. But a feller can't fight after the way he 'pologized."

"O' course not."

"Well, let it go. I wonder what could a-upset him so?"

"Ye told me wunst 't he hated wimmin. Mebbe it was the sight o' me 't done it."

Billy gave a long whistle.

"That's jest it!" he cried, slapping his thigh. "D'ye know, Mariar, sometimes I've thought 't mebbe he was disapp'inted in love in his younger days, 'n' it sort o' soured 'im ag'in' the sex. I swear, it looks like it, don't it, now?"

"Yes," answered Maria faintly.

"Poor feller," said Billy, compassionately. "Poor feller! He must a-thought a heap o' her to let it drive 'im off 'ere in sech a upset way. 'N' what a queer ring he can put into them big words o' his'n! I can't allus understan' the words, but the meanin' o' his voice ain't good. He don't talk like that when we're alone; come to think, I reckon he lets me do most o' the talkin'. But suthin' in his words to-day riled me. I can feel it, but it's 's hard to put my finger on 's one o' them 'Frisco fleas."

Maria laughed nervously.

"We mustn't jedge his tone too ha'sh when we can't make out the words," she said. "Mebbe the words meant better 'n the voice made 'em seem."

"His eyes said 's much 's his voice did," continued Billy, meditatively. "I never seen sech a eye in a man's head. I never reely noticed till to-day, but it's like the open back-door o' hell."

They went on in silence for some time, both grave and thoughtful. Billy did not try to talk after these first few words. Even the utterance of these had been an effort, and he was not in a mood to exert himself further.

The evident hollowness of Hulse's unexpected, undesired apology caused him to wonder keenly why that contradictory man had proffered it. Not from cowardice, Billy was sure, for it had often been said of Hulse that he seemed careless of danger and eager for death.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR. PUGSLEY lighted his pipe and sat down by the window for a comfortable smoke. Things were going well with him; he was getting on in the world in just the manner he had always desired to get on,—he was doing nothing, and there seemed no necessity for him to do anything in all the infinity of time that was to come. The laundry business had proved a success. He had enough to eat,—boiled chicken was an event of almost daily occurrence in the Pugsley family in these days,—and Maria even furnished him with a little spending-money besides,—enough to keep himself in a condition of sunny good-nature about the house. Perhaps Maria had an eye to the latter convenience when she counted out his financial allowance every morning; Ephraim did not know nor care. The only fault he could find with Maria was that thus far she had come to no definite “settlement” with Billy; and that Billy was anxious for a speedy and favorable answer to his suit, Ephraim had assured himself by personal investigation.

It was rumored that half the miners in and about the camp of Havilah had taken to wearing white shirts for the express purpose of having an excuse to pay a weekly visit to the Pugsley cabin. The unencumbered masculine element in the community declared that Maria’s ways were “fetchin’” and that Maud Eliza’s jokes were worth listening to, if for no other reason, because she enjoyed them so much herself. Maria was satisfied with her income, and worked ceaselessly, day and night; Maud Eliza, too, had suddenly become more serious, and had settled down to business with a feminine adaptability which recognized

as an ultimate aim the charms of hitherto unattainable calico gowns with exaggerated ruffles of an ideal fulness. As for Mrs. Pugsley, she partook of the growing prosperity of the family. She looked much less moist than formerly, though her partial dryness, it must be confessed, seemed too superficial to resist even a slight relapse of good fortune. To-day she lay on the lounge,—Maria's first money had been invested in a second-hand lounge for her mother,—in calm contemplation of a long-delayed elegance which she felt to be picturesque, indeed, though remotely so compared with the magnificence into which it might have developed had metamorphosis set in earlier in life, before she had ceased, for all practical purposes, to be longer accounted a Swipes. However, there was no denying that it *was* something like a lady to lie on the lounge all day in a new calico gown which luxuriated in a flounce a half yard wide. But Mrs. Pugsley's great pride and glory was a white muslin cap with a frightened-looking pink bow on the front, which she had insisted on as the exact counterpart of one that "Ma Swipes" always wore. Mrs. Pugsley's supreme longing now was for a spotted collar with a blue stripe around it, and a pair of cardinal stockings, after which she could feel that the final goal of her life had been attained, and that nothing remained for her but to go on contemplating her surprising elegance until the time when she should be gathered to her fathers.

As Maria and Maud Eliza stood at the table this afternoon busily ironing, Mrs. Pugsley had ample time and opportunity to view her own gown and theirs with a comparative, diagnostic eye. All were from the same piece of calico,—Maria had bought a whole bolt cheap because a yard or so was damaged,—but Mrs. Pugsley cherished a decided preference for the make and fit of her own. Maria's certainly wrinkled about the shoulders,

and Maud Eliza's was so tight that it gaped between the buttons. Mrs. Pugsley's eyes being in front of her, she could form no conception of the phenomenal flatness her own garment gave to her back when she occasionally stood up to readjust herself, nor could she perceive that it was shorter behind than before and was very scant of gathers in the back and very full of them on the hips. Had her training been of the sort to develop a power of impersonal generalization, she might have characterized the toilets of all three as finery which aspiring poverty had a hand in making ; but in the novel consciousness of new clothes, she felt no interest beyond her advance from old standards, and rested calmly in the belief that her suddenly acquired raiment represented the ultimatum of opulence and good taste. Mr. Pugsley himself from his seat by the window occasionally glanced toward his family with a proprietary expression of approval, and then looked away thoughtfully, imagining a glorious future in which all things—even a plug hat for himself—seemed possible and probable.

“Well, ole woman,” said he, cheerfully, “this is suthin’ like livin’, now, ain’t it? Ye ’n’ both the gals dressed up to the Queen’s taste ’n’ enjoyin’ yerselves, ’n’ me a settin’ ’ere a-smokin’ my pipe ’s easy ’s pie! This is bloomin’, this is ! I ain’t no objections to lettin’ this last forever !”

Mrs. Pugsley's secret satisfaction in the contemplation of her gown faded instantly. Having accustomed herself to the belief that she possessed all the diseases of humanity, an insinuation that she might be enjoying herself roused all her querulous resentment into activity.

“Oh, yes,” she quavered, with her old look of superficial patience. “I’m perfectly well. Who ’s heard me complain? *I* ’m allus well. Why don’t ye set me to makin’ garden? They ain’t nothin’ the matter o’ *me* !”

And she sighed, wiping away an imaginary tear on her cap-string.

“They’s people as don’t know they feel bad ’less they hear theirselves howl,” remarked Ephraim. “Ye orter feel good in that new gownd o’ your’n.”

“I do—I do!” cried Mrs. Pugsley, with hysterical sobs. “Don’t ye see how cheerful I be—how grateful I be? What wooman could be more so with the pains a-runnin’ through ’er like burnin’ fire? Oh, my side! oh, my liver!”

“Lor’, dad, let ’er alone,” said Maria, testing the heat of her flat-iron with her moistened finger. “She’s been feelin’ bad s’ long’t it’s got to be a habit now. Let ’er be!”

“Even my darter goes back on me,” whimpered Mrs. Pugsley, shaking her head drearily. “I stan’ alone!”

“Mebbe if she’d take to drinkin’,” said Maria, in a voice which Ephraim thought a trifle too significant, “she’d be cheerfuller. Hadn’t ye better persuade ’er, dad?”

Mrs. Pugsley seemed to consider the proposition seriously.

“Raw whiskey was allus too hard fer my neck,” she complained, feebly. “’Tain’t no use to try to keep cheerful that way. I never could stan’ it, not even when dad kep’ his place there to the Bar, ’n’ I was a gal then, too, with a reg’lar Swipes stummick ’t was ekal to anything.”

“I ain’t been drinkin’ heavy lately, Maria,” said Ephraim. “Ye talk like I’d been runnin’ over my ’low-ance, ’n’ I ain’t, not wunst.”

“Oh, I know that,” was the answer.

“A man like me——” began Ephraim.

Maria laughed.

“A man like *you*!” she cried. “Oh, dad, that’s too good. The Lord was only jokin’ when he made ye, dad; He didn’t intend ye fer a man!”

Maud Eliza slammed her flat-iron down on the table and snorted.

“A man like me,” proceeded Ephraim, choosing to disregard these things, “has stren’th o’ mind ’nough to keep in bounds—allus in bounds. They’s bounds to every-thing, ’n’ I allus keep inside o’ ’em, my dear. That’s the kind o’ hollyhock *I* be !”

He emptied his pipe by striking the inverted bowl several times against the heel of his boot ; then filled it again with whittlings from a plug of chewing tobacco which he always carried in his pocket.

“Mariar,” he said, when he was puffing comfortably again, “I want to ask ye jes’ one question. D’ye mind?”

“Oh, ask away,” she answered. “I needn’t answer ’less I like.”

“What I want to know is,” said Ephraim, in the tone of one who is willing to retract his words if they are not agreeable, “what I want to know is, what be ye a-goin’ to do with Billy Bling?”

“What be I a-goin’ to do with ’im?”

Finding that his question was not resented as an unpardonable liberty, the head of the family went on with more independence :

“Them was my words—what be ye a-goin’ to do with Billy Bling? Be ye a-goin’ to take ’im, or be ye a-goin’ to give ’im the shake? Be ye a-goin’ to let ’im keep on comin’ here till kingdom come without gittin’ at a settlement, or be ye a-goin’ to marry ’im ’n’ settle down like a gal o’ sense?”

“It’s his house, ’n’ I reckon he can come ’s often ’s he wants to. *I* ain’t a-goin’ to turn ’im out.”

“What I want to know is,” said Ephraim, more impressively, wheeling himself about in his chair and facing her, “be ye a-goin’ to marry ’im or no? That’s what I want to know.”

He replaced his pipe in his mouth with the resolve that, as long as Maria made no objection to his taking an interest in her affairs, he would continue to perform his duty as a father.

Maria was silent.

"Billy's a fine young feller," continued Ephraim, taking his pipe from his mouth again and emphasizing his words by repeatedly dabbing it at her. "'N' he's got the rocks, too. They ain't no better prospecks nowheres in this deestrick 'n his'n. Scriptor don't advertise no better gold fer the ancient land o' Havilah 'n what's found right on Billy's claim."

"Well!" said Maria. "Whose Bible 've *you* been s'prisin' by lookin' into it?"

"Nobody's!" cried Ephraim, triumphantly. "I heerd 'bout it down to Boosey's. Ye see, that's the sort o' thing we talk over, down there. One ole feller 't used to be a parson som'ers back in the States, they say, was talkin' 'bout Billy's claim, t'other day, 'n' them was his words: 'D—n it!' says he, 'the gold off 'm that claim beats the gold o' Scriptural Havilah all to thunder!' Says I, 'I didn't know they was any sech thing as a Havilah in Scriptor.' 'Well,' says he, 'they was, 'n' the Bible says the gold o' that land was good.' Them was his very words. 'N' now ye can see the 'vantage o' stayin' aroun' 'n' hearin' what's goin' on."

"Yes, I see," said Maria. "Have ye got any more o' them air flamin' remarks to make?"

Here Maud Eliza tittered disagreeably.

"I wish 't ye wouldn't do that, Maud Eliza," said Ephraim, with mild persuasion. "It sounds like a ole hen 't's scared."

"It's the chicken we had fer dinner," giggled the girl in explanation. "I et so much o' 't I can hardly keep from cacklin' all the time!"

“ Seems to me like ye’ve got less understan’in’ ’n’ usual,” said Ephraim, displeased.

“ Oh, no, I hain’t!” declared Maud Eliza, who scintillated with high spirits this afternoon. “ I’ve got the usual ’mount o’ understan’in’, plus one corn.”

At this retort everybody laughed except Mrs. Pugsley, who groaned.

“ It ’ud be a good thing fer all o’ us,” continued Ephraim after their mirth had subsided, “ if ye could make up yer mind in favor o’ Billy. He’d make ye a good husban’——”

“ When I git ready fer the great ‘ I Am,’ I’ll prob’ly find ’im ’thout any help from you,” interrupted Maria, but not angrily. And Ephraim ventured to proceed :

“ ’N’ he wouldn’t be mean towards yer ma ’n’ the rest o’ us. He’d be willin’ to pervide fer us han’sim——”

“ Ye git ’nough to eat ’n’ drink, don’t ye?” asked Maria, with a little impatience.

“ Oh, I ain’t no call to complain o’ that,” answered Ephraim hastily. “ That’s all right—perfekly right. What I want is to see ye settled comf’table.”

“ ’N’ yerself settled comf’table along o’ me,” added Maria, with some bitterness.

But Ephraim pretended not to notice.

“ A wooman ’t ain’t married ain’t no good in this world. She’s like half a punkin seed—she won’t never ’mount to nothin’. Ye orter think o’ it serious, Mariar. Ye’ll never git another such a chance. I hope ye hain’t got no other notions into yer head.”

She flushed hotly, but did not bid him to hold his tongue as he expected her to do.

“ I ain’t a critter o’ notions,” she muttered ; “ ye know that. I don’t want to be dependent on nobody. It’s a pore hen ’t can’t scratch fer herself.”

“ Yes, but I can never be sure o’ what’s comin’ to ye, Mariar. Ye’ve been so sober lately——”

“ That’s ’cause I ain’t had no ammunition to fire with.

“ So sober lately ’t I’ve jes’ felt all the time like ye was secretly goin’ ag’in’ yer own int’rests ’n’ the int’rests o’ the hull fam’ly. How’s a man to know what’s a-goin’ to git into a wooman’s head one minnit after another? A man can never tell what’s a-goin’ on in the nex’ room, ’n’ who can say what thoughts go frolickin’ aroun’ permisc’us under a young wooman’s skull? Lord! like’s not they’s some other feller this minnit ’t ye’re sweet on.”

Maria went on ironing but her face was burning.

“ Some wuthless chap, mebbe, ’t ’ll work ye like a ole hoss ’n’ live off ’n yer wages.” Ephraim suddenly recollected that this was dangerous ground and stopped short. “ I’d hate to see ye make a bad match, Mariar,” he added, “ after havin’ a chance to make sech a good ’un.”

“ Ye needn’t worry, dad,” she said, very quietly. “ I’ll marry whoever I like, I can assure ye o’ that—if I can git him. ’Tain’t fer *you* to be callin’ folks lazy ’n’ mean, no-how. Fer myself, it takes so much o’ my time to keep myself clean ’t I ain’t got no time to go aroun’ advisin’ my neighbors to wash theirselves, ’n’ if ye’ll jes’ keep yer-self decent, I reckon my future husban’ ’ll git along nicely ’thout any interference o’ your’n.”

Her tone was so mild that Ephraim thought it safe to appear offended.

“ I reckon a father’s got a right to advise his own darter,” he said. “ ’N’ even if he hain’t, the law o’ the land ’lows a man to speak when he feels like it. It’s a free country——”

“ It’s a free country fer everybody to pay their way through,” snickered Maud Eliza, determined to be facetious till the last.

Mrs. Pugsley here gave over a renewed contemplation of her toilet, and remarked, weakly :

“ I don’t see why Mariar can’t marry ’im to wunst ’n’

git it over with. That's the way *I* done, 'n' I was more o' a Swipes 'n' she is. Ye've got to marry sometime, no matter what goes afore or after. 'N' it's easier 'n it looks. All ye've got to do 's to stan' up afore the squire 'n' say yes to everything he asks ye, 'n' there ye be!"

Maria made no reply, but when Ephraim started on the subject again she told him so decidedly she had heard enough of it that he wisely concluded to say no more.

That evening Billy came in and asked Maria to go with him for another walk by the river. Ephraim sat at the window and watched the two young people as they disappeared among the cottonwoods.

"Mariar 'll have to settle the matter to-night," he said to Maud Elizà and his wife. "I could see it in his eye. 'Sides that, Billy told me to-day that was what he was comin' down fer. Ye two wimmin can go to bed when ye like, but I'm goin' to wait till that gal comes back if it 's till midnight."

It was quite late when her step ascended the veranda, and he knew that she was alone. Billy had evidently not even accompanied her to the gate. The moon flared like a Pentecostal flame on the hills; there was no light in the room, but a slant flood of moonlight poured in at one of the windows and fell full upon her face as she passed through the room. She looked haggard, almost deathly in the wan light, and her eyes were red as if with long weeping.

Ephraim stirred uneasily to attract her attention, and she, as if understanding the movement, turned toward him with her face in shadow. She looked at him a moment in silence and then said, almost tenderly:

"Have ye been waitin' fer me all this time, dad? Well, I've settled it. I've told 'im I couldn't marry 'im—never. 'N' now I want ye never to say 'nother word to me 'bout it."

CHAPTER XXX.

To a baby's eyes I suppose this earth appears very much as it did in primordial times, "without form and void." And sometimes, later on in life, after long battling with the social elements has upset our nerves and dizzied our brains, after the sighing insufficiency of everything has culminated in some particular disappointment which wrenches us out of harmony with our surroundings, we are resolved, so to speak, into our elements, and presently find ourselves in the midst of the evolution of new worlds.

The process of reconstruction is likely to result in a madman or a genius. I am aware that this view of the matter seems to popularize, and, after a manner, set a premium on insanity, (for which, Heaven knows! there is no need), but at second thought the intelligent reader can hardly fail to discover a solution of this difficulty in the well-known fact that one-half the world considers the other half foolish, while the half so vilified revenges itself by circulating wild stories which go to prove that its vilifier is insane. Probably most of us would object to our neighbor's estimate of our common-sense, and as a personal estimate would by no means be accepted by our neighbor, we are constrained to let the matter rest where we find it, and, by refraining from poetry, avoid a reputation for utter imbecility.

In the matter of disappointments the softening influence of science is noticeable in these days. After longer astronomical observation than would seem necessary, the average man finds himself on the verge of tearful melancholy on discovering that, in spite of hope's flattering tale, the moon is *not* made of green cheese; that, were it so

constituted, no mortal could by any possible means obtain as much as a bite of it ; and that, even were it an easy thing to satisfy this celestial soul-hunger, a most distressing state of the stomach would probably ensue,—the pernicious qualities of green cheese being but one of many unforgivable oversights in a creation which often refuses to adapt means to ends. Thus science offers alleviations for the wounds of the spirit by teaching indirectly that what we cannot get we are more comfortable without getting.

A lunar disappointment, traced through its various stages as above, may be easily construed to mean a love disappointment, certain indefinable relations having been established between lovers and the moon ever since love and the moon were in a rudimentary state : it being understood that oysters and other beings of mild intelligence were the chief exponents of the tender passion in remote ages as at the present day.

But in a simple, untutored nature like Billy Bling's, having no powers of philosophic generalization, capable of strong, loving, unreasoning emotions, containing none of the starch of scientific deduction, there is nothing, as in the case of us wise astronomers who crave green cheese, to stiffen the faculties at the moment of disappointment and collapse, and prevent certain mental disorders which flavor oddly of poetry, madness, and healthy human sentiment. And we wise people, who have doubtless never done anything foolish or mad or human, smile and sigh over it and call it very pitiful, never suspecting that what we pity as weakness may be such genuine strength as the heaped-up refinement of the world cannot balance in the scale of magnanimity.

The peculiarity of Billy's mental condition after that decisive moonlight meeting with Maria manifested itself most strangely in the readiness with which he stifled the

pain of his great disappointment and converted his love for her into an overflowing energy of unselfish friendship. He went from that interview stunned like one who has fallen from a tower. Several times he stopped on the way home to rest and look about him and try to understand what had happened. He could remember that she had said she did not love him as a wife should love her husband, and that she could never be his. It had all been made plain of late, she added. The consciousness of irremediable rejection was with him from the first, like the consciousness of his wretched, broken life; but that was not what wrought most keenly on his thoughts. What he could not understand was her ambiguous words and actions. She had been very kind to him—he remembered her kindness not only as a pain to himself, but as a proof that she could never care for him as he wished.

“Billy, Billy!” she had cried, and he remembered how the moonlight rested on her white face, “if ye knowed—if ye only knowed, ye wouldn’t blame me, ye couldn’t have the heart!”

She had gone on to tell him brokenly that she, too, was miserable, unutterably miserable,—that she wished she were dead and out of all the trouble that had come upon her. He could never forget how she said that she wished she were dead. She looked so white and yet so passionate—there was something about her that chilled him and made him think that she was already dead and had opened her cold lips in a sudden passion of sorrow to tell him of her grief. He could not question her then, and he would not have done so if he could. He had left her without a word; it was all that he could do.

As he sat on a stone by the way that night, he had tried to think of it collectedly, but his thoughts were rambling and incoherent—sometimes of himself, oftener of some irrelevant detail of her face or voice. He could only utter

brokenly, "Poor Mariar!" or repeat in a vacant way, "I wish 't I knowed—I wish 't I knowed!" He could hardly get farther than that simple wish. And then he thought feebly of what the future might do. Perhaps she would tell him her sorrow if he urged her, sometime; he would like to help her and see her happy, even if he were always miserable himself. How could a girl like her be miserable, he wondered; she had in her all that is necessary to life and happiness in others. It was strange that she could be unhappy in herself.

He rose and walked on up the path. The moon was shining and all the stars were out. All about him the sweet, soft grass of the valley rose to his knees, and he could see the flowers everywhere in the moonlight. He did not care for them now any more than he cared for the stars in the sky; they were all equally remote, impersonal, unimpressive. He remembered as in a dream that he had gathered some blue-flags for Maria when he passed down this path between the foothills and the river earlier in the evening, but she had hardly noticed them when he gave them to her, only pulling them absently to pieces and letting them fall upon the grass. That was before he asked her for her decision—ages ago, he thought, when he was young and hopeful. He pulled a handful of the delicate blossoms now and crushed them against his palm, then let them drop one by one. They had no meaning for him, these petalled histories of life; if Maria did not care for them, of what use were they in the world?"

Well, it was all ended now, the hope and the longing. He walked forward with bowed head, feeling a vague pity for his wounded self, such as he had once felt in holding a broken-winged bird in his hands and watching its forced resignation to inactive pain after a season of aspiration and vivid joy. His sorrow seemed quite close to him, and yet very far away. All ended! He repeated the words

hollowly, dully, listening to them as he might listen in a trance to the clods falling upon his own coffin. It was the end of all things to him—he might go on existing from day to day, but all real life and happiness were over forever. Not that he cared so much for himself—he could bear anything but the knowledge that Maria was crushed beneath the weight of some secret sorrow. He could have cried aloud to Heaven out of sympathy for her. His own trouble was too hopeless to manifest itself aggressively in cries of lamentation. It lay under all thought and feeling like a recognized, insidious disease.

He had hoped for so much—he had looked forward with such joyous expectation to possessing all that he really cared for in the world; not because he had ever believed himself worthy of Maria's regard—his reverent love had always placed her infinitely beyond him—but because he had cherished a wish-begotten faith that she might somehow care for him in spite of his faults—might regard these faults with womanly pity, and try to cure him of them and make him more like her. What might he not become, with her always at his side, aiding, encouraging, admonishing, as he felt that she alone had power to do! Love, like the fruit-tree whose seed is in itself, has in it all the highest possibilities of existence. It is a glorious thing—it is prophetic of ever-increasing glory. And even if Maria could not care for him now, he would be willing to wait if she would only let him hope, only let him believe that she would finally turn to him. But she had left no chance for him to delude himself further; her words had been decisive, and her manner had been even more decisive than her words.

So, by the time Billy reached his cabin that night, all sensation of personal grief was merged in the greater trouble of knowing that Maria was suffering and might need his help. His own longings had already receded

into the background, forming a setting, as it were, for her all-important sorrow. It did not matter about himself. He deserved no better ; but she—he thought of her with a yearning which was almost pain. He longed to do something for her, to carry all her troubles for her, to soothe her, comfort her and let her walk lightly through life, as was becoming, among the flowers and in the sunshine. It did not matter what happened to him. He felt that his dead hopes were finally buried. Let them go ! What did it profit to think of them, to mourn over them, to try to resuscitate them ?

He did not lie down that night nor sleep at all. Most of the time he sat quite still, crouched in the little doorway, thinking, thinking. Once in a while he went a short distance down the gulch, but came back directly and sat down in his old position, like a prisoner who has walked the length of his chain and feels the uselessness of a further attempt at freedom. But gradually his ideas became clearer. He could keep his mind on Maria's troubles quite steadily without thinking of himself, except as a possible means of helping her. He had no future—that was hers. He saw no pathos in a vision he had of himself going out to his work day after day, hopelessly living a star-crossed life which must wander from the darkness of the world into the darkness of the grave—a cheerless pilgrimage. He felt that he could neither conceal nor parade his hopeless love. If people guessed the truth, as they might easily do, it was well ; if not, better. Maria would always know. He would hide nothing, reveal nothing. The scars of life are honorable scars whose wearing shames no man. He felt nothing of the grandeur of renunciation in what he did—he only knew that Maria willed it so, and that was enough. He did not philosophize ; he could not have done so on a less personal subject. And this was just as well for him, since it

is a well-known fact that philosophy is a balm for everybody's wounds but one's own.

So the night passed and the morning came, and Billy took his pick and shovel and went out to work as usual. He cared nothing for his promising claim now, but he must do something, and digging was the nearest thing at hand. His long night's watch had not been entirely without results. He half suspected the real cause of Maria's sorrow. Perhaps she loved some other man—doubtless that was it! Billy did not mind that particularly now. She ought to marry the man she cared for. Nobody was too good for her. At any rate, there was no hope for *him*, and why should they both be unhappy? Perhaps she would tell him all about it if he asked her? She was sure to consider him her friend and trust him. And perhaps, if she would tell him, he could help her? However, until she saw fit to give him her confidence he could do nothing.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SEVERAL days passed, and Billy became almost cheerful in thinking of Maria and planning for her future. He even smiled a little one evening as he passed down the gulch and out into the open valley, assuring himself that she would be glad to see him after so long an absence. She would be glad to see him, he felt sure, for she liked him as a friend if nothing more.

“’N she needs a friend in this ’ere trouble o’ her ’n, whatever ’tis,” he said to himself, passing down the green path in the moonlight. “’N’ I’ll stan’ by ’er ’n’ help ’er’n’ be a brother to ’er, ’n’ I’ll learn to be contented with that.”

His sudden appearance at the door of the Pugsley cabin must have elicited a scream from a fashionable young lady whose digestion has been refined by a diet of French candy and daily piano practice continued through a term of years, but as Maria was unacquainted with these means of painting the lily of modern womanhood, and especially as she had just fortified her naturally strong constitution by a hearty supper of bacon and beans, washed down with black coffee, she only glanced up smilingly as Billy thrust his head out of the darkness and said :

“Oh, is it you, Billy? Why, come in, then.”

She seemed in the very best of spirits, and he was glad of that, for he had half feared to find her pale and shaken as he had seen her last. So he came in smiling too, with his hat in his hand, stumbling over the ill-constructed threshold and grasping at a chair to keep from falling. He was a very awkward man. Maria laughed aloud. There was no consciousness of embarrassing memories in her voice as she said :

“I b’lieve ye git boots three-four sizes too big jest a purpose to stumble over things !”

Billy twirled his hat round and round on his finger, still smiling.

“It ain’t a question o’ boots altogether, Mariar,” he said, with quiet humor. “The man inside o’ ’em ’s the principal thing.”

“Don’t ye go to recommending yourself, now,” she continued, shaking her head and arranging her sewing in her lap.

“Well, then, I’ll let the moon do the recommendin’ fer me,” he answered. “See how bright it shines out there on the water ! ye can jes’ see a long line o’ light flashin’ through the trees where the river is. I wonder how many times I’ve asked ye to go out there walkin’ with me sense we met early in the spring ?”

“A good many,” replied Maria, gently.

“Come ! put up yer work ’n’ let’s go out for a little while. Lor ! the walks we’ve had out there together ! I ain’t had a chance to talk to ye fer a age ! Ye don’t know how good the night feels ’n’ how big ’n’ white the mountains look. Ye’ve been in the house all day, I bet, ’n’ it’ll do ye all sorts o’ good to git a whiff of fresh air.”

Maria laid aside her sewing carefully.

“Yes,” she answered, “I’ve been in the house all day, fer they was a big washin’ to do ’n’ ma ’s been uncommon bad besides. She’s in bed now, ’n’ dad’s out som’ers. Maud Eliza’s tryin’ to read a dime novel by candle-light in the woodshed. She’s took to that lately. I reckon I’d like a walk.”

And the two passed out under the clear evening sky.

It was a lovely night. The air was full of stars, poised and tremulous ; they are bubbles blown from God’s mouth. The mountains were piled up against the sky, like thunderheads. The full moon swung over the far white

summits, a burnished silver disk, and the milky way with the stars in its wake looked like a wreath of pale smoke alive with sparks.

"Ye'd better take my arm," said Billy, though he knew that she would refuse.

Maria laughed.

"If ye'd a seen the washin' I done to day," she cried, and the moonlight flashed across her smiling lips and white teeth, "I reckon ye wouldn't think I'm too weak to walk alone. No, no, Billy; keep yer arm for some gal 't needs it. I'd ruther walk by myself. Ye don't know how how strong I be; w'y, I'm a reg'lar hoss o' a wooman!"

"Hosses needs a man to take care o' em, the strongest o' em," remarked Billy, slyly.

"Maria frowned.

"Well, *I* don't!" she declared with emphasis.

"Let's set down here by the river," said he, "where we've sat so many times 'n' where we can see the moonlight on the water. How 't darts 'n' changes 'n' flashes! It dazzles my eyes. There! be ye comf'table?" He laid his big hand caressingly on her shoulder a moment. "I'd like ye to be comf'table, allus," he added in a lower voice.

He had not meant to speak or act with more than brotherly tenderness, but he was conscious of having done so, and resolved to be more careful. He would not cause her pain for the world.

Both sat silent for some time, listening to the water and looking up dreamily at the stars. At last Maria stirred and spoke slowly.

"D'ye know, Billy, I've got lately so 't I love the sky most 's well 's I do the waters. I never watch the stars come out 'without thinkin' o' when they fust appeared in the sky 'n' no one was there to see 'em. I wonder if they shone 's bright then 's what they do now?"

“God was there!” said Billy, solemnly, with his eyes fixed upon the heavens.

She had been sitting with her chin propped upon her hand, and she turned her face toward him quickly with her head slightly lifted.

“Ye allus understood me better ’n anybody else,” she said, softly. “I don’t see how ye do it.”

The kindly appreciation in her words and voice overmastered his resolve to keep silent concerning himself. He said in a low, husky tone :

“I hope ye ain’t sot ag’in’ me, Mariar? I hope ye ain’t got nothin’ ag’in’ me more ’n my ill looks ’n’ awk’ard ways?”

“No, Billy, ’tain’t that; don’t ye think it. I ain’t got the fust thing ag’in’ ye—not the fust thing. Don’t I know ye’re the kindest, best o’ men? Ain’t I got every reason to think so?” She reached out and laid her hand on his, but directly a tremor passed through his frame and the hand she held glided uncertainly from her touch. “Don’t I know ye’re honest ’n’ brave ’n’ true—that ye’d willin’ly give up yer happiness fer mine—yer life fer mine, if they was need o’ it?”

He listened as reverently as if to some one praying.

“Ay, gladly!” she heard him mutter under his breath.

“I know it,” she went on, reaching out again for his hand, which he again drew away as if some restless, contradictory impulse made him repellent of the very friendship which he craved. “But I don’t love ye—not that way, Billy—’n’ that’s the long ’n’ short o’ it. I told ye wunst, the las’ time I saw ye. I like ye as a friend—don’t ye see the dif’rence?”

“Yes, I see,” was the scarcely audible answer.

She could not repress a rising irritation at his compliant words and remote, unheeding looks.

“Then what makes ye do it?” she cried, impelled to

a momentary fault-finding where she wished to be tender. "How many times do ye have to be told? Ye know I don't like it. Ye know I hate it. What makes ye do it, I say?"

"Seems like I couldn't help it this wunst," he said. Then, after a long pause, he turned to her again, and the reflection of the light from the water was still in his eyes. "But I won't do it ag'in, I promise ye that. Be a little easy with me this wunst, my gal. I won't do it ag'in."

She looked at him with a sort of cold wonder. All the gaiety with which he had met her was gone, and his face looked so drawn and old and white.

"Ye ain't mad at me, Billy?" she questioned, half timidly. It was not anger that his face expressed, but she could not imagine what else it could be. "I'd like to be friends with ye. Ye've been very good to me."

"Mad at ye? No, no! I ain't made at ye," he returned, quickly. "How could ye think o' sech a thing? How *could* I be mad at ye? Ye're the best gal in the world, 'n fit fer the best o' everything; 'n' it's very good o' ye—more 'n' I deserve—to want to be friends with a no'-count feller like me."

He was staring at the water again in a spell-bound, unheeding way, which was neither self-absorbed nor rightly conscious of external things. Maria shivered. He looked so patient, so pitiful, so needy. Something of the real pathos of his great renunciation, of the life-long sorrow she had unwittingly caused him, must have flashed upon her, for she rose suddenly from her seat at his side and, flinging her arms above her head, burst into a passion of self-reproachful tears. He was beside her in an instant and had drawn her to him, laying her head against his breast and soothing her with tender, broken words, as if she were a grieving child. She did not try to break

away from him, but rather sought the touch of his hard, caressing hand.

“W’y, what ’ve I done?” he cried, smoothing her disordered hair. “What a beast I am to make ye cry so! There, there, there, my gal. Don’t cry—don’t cry. See, ye’ll make a fool o’ me, Mariar. How can I help cryin’, too, when ye take on so? Don’t cry, there’s my good gal. There! Dry yer eyes ’n’ don’t cry.”

He soothed her thus till gradually her sobs subsided, and she looked into his face with the tears still heavy on her long lashes.

“I couldn’t help it,” she whispered, still clinging to him. “Ye looked so deathly still ’n’ white. Oh, Billy, Billy, can ye ever fergive me? I wish,” she cried, breaking away from him a little way but still holding his hands, “I wish ye was my brother, then this ’ud never a-happened ’n’ things ’ud be jes’ ’s they orte be. ’N’ how comf’table we could live together!”

“I’ll be yer brother—anything ye like—only don’t cry no more. It kills me to see ye in trouble. There! that’s right. Now let’s set down ’n’ talk like brother ’n’ sister. That’s what we air now, ye know. Only see!” and he looked at her with a pitiful, uncertain smile, “ye’ve ’most made me cry, too!”

He placed her gently on the bank and then seated himself a little farther from her than he had been before,—so far that she could not reach out her hand and touch him again.

“I want to ask ye a question,” he said, presently. “We’re brother ’n’ sister now,” he added, as if to remind her of his right to her friendship and confidence.

“Well?” said she.

“Ye must answer it true and honest,” he continued. “If I’m to be yer brother, ye must let me share yer troubles.”

"Well?" she repeated. He thought her voice sounded a little anxious and afraid. He leaned toward her earnestly and reassuringly.

"Ye needn't be afeerd to tell me anything 't's on yer mind, my dear. Who could keer fer ye more, or respect yer wishes stronger? All I want is fer ye to be happy. Ye b'lieve that?"

"Yes," was the faint response.

"Then answer me." He leaned forward and looked into her face with his big, penetrating eyes, while his voice rang out with a sort of massive seriousness.

"D'ye keer fer Jim Hulse, Mariar, in the way—'t ye don't keer fer me?" There was only one little pause in his rapid, decisive utterance of the words. "Ye said wunst 't ye didn't, but that might a-been afore ye knowed yer own mind. Answer me now."

She drew away from him as from something supernatural.

"Tell me," he urged.

She hid her face in her apron, but his voice pursued, and she felt that he was leaning eagerly toward her in the moonlight.

"Tell me," he repeated, gently.

He strained still further forward to catch the word which he knew would come. She drew a long inhalation, as if preparing for an outburst of passion. But she was silent for an instant.

"Tell me, Maria," said the gentle, pleading voice again.

"Billy, Billy!" she cried, her long-pent-up soul leaping out in the stifled words, "how did ye know—how did ye guess? I thought I'd kep' it from everyone—almost from myself. Oh, Billy, if ye knowed how I've fought ag'in' it—if ye knowed——" She broke off with a sudden choking sound in her voice.

He arose and stood with his arms behind him.

“ I think I know—I think I understan’,” he said, with grave simplicity.

She went on more calmly :

“ I fought so hard ag’in’ it. I tried so hard not to think o’ him—so hard to drive him out o’ my mind and make myself free the way I was afore. But his eyes follered me; they burned in the dark at me; they scorched themselves into my flesh !” She put her hand to her head in a frightened way, and went on rapidly : “ It ’s a relief to tell how it was—it does me good. The fault was in my nater—I was allus afeerd o’ what I couldn’t understan’—afeerd o’ it ’n’ fascinated, like. It was so with the river ’n’ the stars, don’t ye ’member ? ’N’ he was like them, only stronger, fuller o’ myst’ry. He clutched me and mastered me with his eyes. A look o’ his ’ud make me foller ’im through fire ’n’ water. I loved ’im in spite o’ myself—I love ’im now. I’d give my soul fer one kind word from ’im.” She ended with a sob, and hid her face again in her apron.

Billy unclasped his hands from behind him, and drew himself erect.

“ I knowed it,” he said, very quietly. “ I’ve been keepin’ track o’ it ’thout knowin’ what I was doin’. It ’s all been made plain in the las’ few days. I knowed it was him—Jim Hulse.”

She uncovered her face. It was all hot and crimson.

“ Ye made me tell ye !” she cried, almost resentfully.

“ Ye won’t be sorry fer trustin’ yer brother,” he said. “ It ’ll be all right.”

“ Ye won’t tell nobody ?” she asked, in sudden fear. “ Ye don’t mean to tell nobody, Billy ? Nobody knows but yerself—nobody in the world.”

“ It’s all right,” was the answer.

“ But ye won’t tell—promise me ye won’t tell !”

But he only repeated softly :

“It ’ll be all right—I’ll make it all right, my dear.”

“I know ye’ll do as I want ye to,” she said. “I’d die o’ shame—I wouldn’t a-owned up if ye hadn’t made me!” she added, irritably.

But he made no reply.

“I’m goin’ home now,” she said, after a moment. “I’ve made a fool o’ myself, ’n’ I hope ye’re satisfied! Ye needn’t trouble to go along o’ me. I’m tired, ’n’ I’d ruther be alone. I’ve had a hard day’s work.”

Still he did not answer, but stood quite motionless, staring out at the restless water. With a movement of petulance, she turned from him and slipped away among the shadows, leaving him there with his own strange thoughts.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE next morning Billy came to a resolution. Very early, before the sun was up, he started for Jim Hulse's cabin. The light was just glancing above the eastern hills as he entered the little enclosure, crossed the brook and went up to the open door. He knew that Hulse was an early riser, and this morning, as he looked into the cabin, he saw its occupant busily engaged in washing his breakfast dishes.

"I'll wait till ye git through, Jim," said Billy, as Hulse looked up. "Then I wish 't ye'd come out 'ere a minute. I've got suthin' on my mind 't I want to say to ye."

He walked down through the narrow opening of the enclosure and stood there, leaning against the cliffs, waiting for Hulse to come out. The light had strengthened. The eastern sky was full of clouds as delicately tinted as sprays of apple blossoms, and there was a long furrow of white across the blue dome from north to south. A little in front of the rock against which he leaned, where the shadows fell thickest, a few tall willows were just bursting into leaf, their dainty catkins showing like frostwork against the clear window of the air. Billy heard the lisp-ing waters absently, and, after a few moments, turned back into the enclosure. The wild-plum blossoms were mostly fallen; but a shivering scent of them was still in the air. As he half stopped, looking up at the tree, a little bird alighted on one of the branches and commenced to sing shrilly and gladly, every tiny feather quivering with the ecstatic earnestness of song. Billy regarded it curiously—the place had seemed so still a moment before.

Presently Hulse came out, putting on his hat as he

came. Billy forgot all about the bird then, and moved a few steps toward his rival, who paused under the plum tree and regarded his visitor with narrow, all-seeing eyes. Billy placed his hands on his hips, according to an awkward habit of his, and stood quite silent.

“You have something to say to me?” asked Hulse, in his slow, emotionless voice.

How deeply his eyes were set under those square, prominent brows, and how passionate and hopeless they looked, as if the coals of a devastated past still smoldered there and would not die out! The mystery of this man’s life insisted itself in every glance and movement. His appearance was like the curtain of a theatre; you longed to see behind it—to know the inmost workings of that tragic world. But the curtain of Jim Hulse’s soul was never lifted. The tragedy of crime or disappointment had been acted, as far as men knew, without a spectator. Billy could understand the influence of those eyes on Maria, for he, too, had been in a measure coerced by their mysterious authority. He felt awed, as if in the presence of a great sorrow or a shipwreck. Hulse’s melancholy lay upon everything around him, like the shadow of a giant oak upon the green sward.

Billy dug the toe of his great boot into the ground, trying to think of a way to begin; then with a sudden backward jerk of his head, as if flinging off an embarrassment which was unworthy of the cause he had come to advocate, he burst forth with rough, incisive directness:

“Ye know me, Jim Hulse! Ye’ve knowed me a good many years now. I can joke ’n’ play the fool, ’n’ I’ve done it often; but when I say a thing in earnest I mean it. Ye b’lieve that?”

Hulse bowed.

“Then, look here. I’ve loved Mariar Pugsley ever sence I sot eyes on ’er—loved ’er true ’n’ honorable, if

ever man loved wooman so. If she needed my heart's blood to make 'er happy, I'd pour it out fer 'er, quick 'n' joyful. That's what I want, Jim—to see 'er happy. But she don't keer fer me—not that way—she never can. 'N' I won't worry 'er. I've found out she loves another man, 'n' I want 'er to be happy with him, if sech a thing can be. I want him to marry 'er, no matter what 'comes o' me!"

He took off his shabby hat and wiped his forehead on his sleeve.

"Well?" said Hulse, without taking his eyes from the other's face.

It seemed to Billy that his statement had been explicit enough.

"Be ye a fool?" he cried, in wrath. "Can't ye guess the rest—can't ye see? The man she loves is *you*, Jim Hulse! Don't ye understan'?"

Hulse's sphinx-like face remained quite unmoved. Billy had expected it to become radiant with sudden joy. His anger gave place to amazement. Could it be that Hulse—that any man—found no delight in the prospect of Maria's love? Or was it only this hermit's passive way of receiving the glad intelligence?

"I know ye're prouder 'n Lucifer," proceeded Billy, after waiting vainly for the other to speak. "But yer a straight, fair man in yer deal, if ye *be* queer. 'N' ye're worthy o' 'er, 's fur 's *I* know." His eyes softened and his voice lost its angry ring. "We've been friends a long time, Jim. 'N' now I want ye to marry 'er 'n' make 'er happy. She deserves it—she deserves the best o' everything. I want 'er to be happy—she *mus'* be—a wooman like 'er wa'n't put into the world to be mis'able, like the rest o' us."

Hulse gave a slow, downward glance at the rivulet at his feet, and when he looked up he was smiling, but not

with his customary sarcasm. Then he took a step forward and held out his hand. Billy laid his palm in it, smiling, too. This was an easier victory than he had anticipated.

“You are a hero, Billy Bling,” said the strange man, and his usually indifferent tones were as earnest as the grasp of his strong, hard hand. “A knight—a misplaced hero, born too late for the world to hear of, but none the worse for that. You prove to me that a man may live plainly yet think and feel in frescoes.” He laid his left hand on Billy’s shoulder and with his other he still grasped his visitor’s right.

“Ay, it is settled, then,” said Billy, trying to release his hand. But Hulse held it fast, and there was a look of further speech in his eyes.

“I am glad you came to me, Billy,” he said presently, and his voice was grave and deep. “Such an example of unselfishness revives me; but—it comes too late for me to profit by it. Listen!” Billy felt the fingers that held his hand stiffen as if turning into steel. “You make me respect you for the act of self-sacrifice you would like to perform, but—” he flung away Billy’s hand with a force that left it hanging lax as if broken; then he folded his long arms and stood erect, “but, with regard to the lady,—you must excuse me.” The old cynical smile flashed into his face; he turned abruptly, and, without another word, entered the cabin, closing the door behind him.

And Billy went out into the valley once more, and the sunshine was like blackness along his path.

Next morning early he came again to Jim Hulse’s cabin. There were dark circles under his eyes, his face looked haggard and flaccid, his lips were drawn and pale. He leaned his rifle against the door-post and looked in.

No one was there.

“He’s prospectin’ up Snow Gulch,” said he, and passed on.

He found Hulse at work with pick and shovel, digging up the hard soil.

“I’ve come ag’in, Jim,” he said, leaning on his gun. “We’ll have that biz’ness settled this time. I’ve fetched my rifle along, ye see.”

Hulse looked up with a faint little smile,—almost of gladness. Billy had never seen him smile like that before.

“I’m glad to see you, Billy,” laying down his shovel and leaning against a rock. “I’ve expected you, longed for you, but I thought you would come in the conventional form, with a grin on your face and a scythe in your hand. No matter—the gun will do. •You’re welcome. What are you going to do?”

“I thought about it all las’ night,” replied Billy, passing his hand across his forehead in a tired way. “I didn’t sleep a wink—I couldn’t. ‘N’ I’ve come to a conclusion, Jim, ‘n’ it’s this: the man ‘t refuses to marry Mariar Pugsley ‘n’ make ‘er happy—she’s worthy o’ the best, I tell ye!—don’t deserve to live. He deserves to die,—he’s got to die. Not but what he may be a square man—I won’t say nothin’ ag’in’ ‘im—but he’s got to die, ‘n’ I’m the man to kill ‘im. I’m ‘er brother, Jim—I’m ‘er brother!” His voice rose despairingly. “Who else’s she got to look to fer justice? I’ve come a-purpose to shoot ye. That’s what I’m here fer. I must have yer life.”

Hulse smiled more broadly than before. He did not shift his position in the least, but regarded his companion with a look of mingled pity and admiration.

“You show poor taste, Billy,” he said at last, “to take from me the least valuable of my possessions. If you had chosen to rob me of my Homer, now—but no matter.” He pushed himself away from the rock and stood erect.

"We've been friends for a long time, Billy," he said. "There's no need of our being enemies now."

"I d' know 's we need be enemies," replied Billy, doggedly, fumbling with his gun. "But bein' friends with me won't save ye. Ye've got to die."

"I didn't mean that. I meant that dying by the hand of a friend is a better end than I expected to make. Very well; we are friends, then?"

"Yes, if ye mean it that way."

"But you intend to give me a chance, too? You don't mean that you are to do all the killing yourself—that I am to stand up like a stick to be shot at and knocked over?"

Billy passed his hand over his forehead again and closed his eyes as if trying to collect his thoughts.

"That's what I meant to do," he said, finally. "But I hadn't thought it out right on both sides. I see now—I see that wouldn't be fair."

"You might regret it afterwards," said Hulse, almost affably, as he shouldered his tools. "Come up to my cabin and I'll get my rifle, too. We want the thing done fairly on both sides."

"We can do the biz'ness there 's well 's anywheres," assented Billy, and the two men passed out of the cool shadows of Snow Gulch under the great, empty sky.

They reached the cabin in a few minutes and Hulse deposited his pick and shovel in a corner of the room. "They'll do for some other poor devil," he muttered, without looking back at them. Then he shouldered his rifle, cast a glance at the row of books above the table, and, in a moment more, the two men were on their way toward the river, shoulder to shoulder, stepping evenly, crushing the grasses and flowers under their heavy tread.

For a little time the birds and the winds were silent as if in awe of a dread event; only the river was audible,

filling the landscape with a whirling inundation of sound, The valley looked awed and solemn. Surely, man is less the image of God than are the rocks, the rivers and the trees !

“Stand 'ere,” said Billy. “I'll go over there by the cottonwood. That's 'bout the right distance, ain't it?” And he pointed with his gun.

“Shake hands first, friend,” said Hulse. And the two men stood with their hands clasped, looking into each other's eyes.

“How loud the water roars—d'ye hear it?” cried Billy, and Hulse nodded. “It throbs in my head—it shakes the trees 'n' the sky.”

They gained their places, and Hulse shouted so that Billy could hear him above the roar of the river :

“Aim straight at my heart, now ! Fair play is the word—for both of us !”

“Ay—ay—fair play !” came back the answer above the flood of dizzy sound.

And the river thundered and sent its numbness through the brains of the two men.

They raised their rifles.

“One—two—three—”

It was Hulse who counted.

There were two flashes, two reports.

One wavering instant and Billy saw his antagonist lying among the sweet spring grasses, with a bullet in his heart. And *he* himself was standing alone by the cottonwoods, uninjured, untouched. And the river sounded on.

All sounds from the unseen shore of life are lost in the noise of the loud waters !

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ALL that day Billy remained near the spot where the duel had taken place. Two or three times he walked a little way up the river, but he soon came back as if realizing the uselessness of attempting to break away from the place. He had taken off his hat, not so much to cool his head, as to ease himself of a great weight which pressed against his brain, and crushed all power of thought out of it. The sun beat remorselessly upon his face, but without bringing anything of color into his wan, fallen cheeks. He had torn his shirt collar wide apart, and the blood in the big veins at his throat throbbed madly, but with a strange, dizzying coldness which poured the numbness of paralysis into his thoughts. Several times he had approached the body of the dead man and gazed upon it fixedly, as if to photograph the picture upon his soul for eternity; and when he walked away from it, he had a way of steadying himself, as if bracing his mind to look at something horrible that still lay before him on the grass. Time and again, after glaring at a certain spot with wide, unwinking eyes, he turned away shudderingly as if to avoid contact with a visible horror, and took a direction at right angles to his former path. But at night when the sun had finally set, and he could resist the fascination that held him near that set white face, he left the spot and went slowly up the valley to his own cabin. Then he lighted a candle and opened a drawer in the rough deal table, and took out a folded paper. He examined it carefully as if to make sure that it was what he wanted.

“I’m glad I made it out afore Jim Hulse refused to do

what I asked o' 'im," he muttered. "I don't believe I could write it now."

Then he went out into the night once more, leaving the candle burning.

The wind had played with his unkempt hair at will, and when he presented himself at the door of the Pugsley cabin, where he found the old lady alone, he looked so haggard, so wild, in the dim light that Mrs. Pugsley gave a shrill scream of terror at sight of him and, without allowing him to enter or even speak, told him that Maria had gone for a walk by the river, and that he had better go at once and find her. He turned from the door dully without a word. In spite of the numbness in his head, he knew perfectly well where he would find her by the river.

The world had a veiled look to his eyes. The moon was shining, but its beams were uncertain, and the stars glimmered through thin clouds, like women's eyes through shreds of gauze. As he passed under the cottonwoods, he stopped a moment and looked wistfully up among the still branches; and suddenly the moon came out from behind a cloud and the light fluttered down through the branches like myriad white-winged birds.

"I wish it 'ud stay so," he muttered, folding his arms and staring up at the full, round disk. "I didn't use to care; but now—I hate the dark—'n' I hate the daylight, too." But even as he spoke a great white cloud surged across the moon like a foaming wave, and the light was gone.

And he went on toward the river, muttering to himself.

"Whatever the preachers may say life is wuth," he said, "it ain't wuth livin'." And the river repeated the words far and near.

He found Maria, as he had expected, sitting in the old place on the fallen log by the water. Her hands were

loosely clasped in her lap, and her sun-bonnet lay on the grass at her feet. He stood watching her a long time before she was aware of his presence.

But again the moon came out, flinging the slim shadows of reeds out upon the water. It threw his own shadow at her feet, and, when he saw that she noticed it, he moved softly forward and stood before her.

“W’y, Billy!” she cried, startled in spite of herself at sight of his altered face and manner. “Ye come like a ghost out o’ the shadders. What in the world’ve ye been doin’ to make ye look so? Where’ve ye been? ‘N’ wher’s yer hat?”

He came still farther forward, and tried to smile at her easily and reassuringly—such a wan, piteous, tremulous smile! His eyes were filmed with a dead lustre which seemed like an interposition of something tangible between his thoughts and whatever he fastened his gaze upon.

“I’m all right,” he said, not heeding her questions. “Don’t ye see? Ye needn’t be afeerd o’ me. Nothin’’s the matter. Look! my hand don’t shake, does it?” He held his hand out where the light could fall upon it. “Ye mustn’t think anything’s wrong with me or—or be afeerd o’ me. I reckon I’ll set down,” he added. “I’m ruther tired.” She made a place for him on the log at her side, but he turned away hastily. “Not there!” he said, in a fearful whisper. Then, recollecting himself, “I—I’d ruther set ’ere, if ye don’t mind.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she answered. “Only the grass is damp, ’n’ ye may ketch cold.”

He burst into shrill, unnatural laughter.

“That ’ud be too bad! I’m sech a dellycut creeter—poor little feller! What if I’d ketch cold ’n’ die?” He stopped laughing as abruptly as he had begun, and sat quite still a few moments, occasionally moistening his

dry lips with his tongue and rubbing them with the back of his hand.

"The river ain't so noisy to-night," he went on, after a while, staring out at the tossing water. "Don't ye think it 's quieter 'n it was this mornin'? Or didn't ye notice how it roared! I hate the sound o' it when it fills my head 'n' drowns my thoughts, 'n' shakes the clouds all up with the sun."

She had regarded him so long as her best friend that it had become a habit to think of him as one who would avert danger from her rather than precipitate it. Had any one but Billy looked and talked so she would have felt genuine alarm.

"The nights are allus quiet 'ere," was all she said.

"Yes. 'N' I heerd ye say wunst ye liked to see the stars come out one by one—d'ye 'member? See, they're all out now. 'N' the evenin'—to-night it come like the benediction after singin'. Only it was a bad day, 'n' I hate the dark. I hate it wuss 'n what I do broad daylight. D'ye 'member the benediction, Mariar?"

"Yes, I 'member," she answered, moving a little away from him.

"They used to say benediction jes' afore meetin' was out, back there in Ohio," he continued, dreamily. " 'N' the beeches outside the winder stood up straight 'n' tall 'n' still."

Then he was silent again for a long time, gazing out at the dimly-lighted landscape and restlessly pulling up the grass by the roots and fumbling with it on his knees.

How quiet, yet how instinct with life the spring night was! Maria realized it with a sense of incongruity. The air was full of the growth and aspiration which thrills all things when young buds no longer nestle quietly, but spread their wings to the soft air. The near river was a continuous ripple of song.

“ This life—this life ! ” he muttered, turning toward her and clasping his big hands, still full of grass, around his knee. Then creeping forward with a stealthy, gliding movement, he peered into her face, and whispered, with a frown : “ D’ye know what it means, Mariar—I say, d’ye know what life means ? ”

“ W’y,” she answered, frightened at last, “ to me it means a chance to do my duty by mother—nothin’ more.”

He seized her wrist and held her in a grasp that made her moan.

“ No more ? ” he cried, in a repressed voice. “ No more ’n that ? Listen ! I’ll tell ye. I’ve been thinkin’ o’ it all day.” His lips were now close to her ear, and his voice struck her cheek like a sting. “ It means a chance to git ready fer hell ! ” And he flung her hand away and sunk back upon the grass, scowling and muttering.

“ Ye ain’t yerself, Billy, or ye wouldn’t a-hurt me like that,” she complained, rubbing her hand where he had clutched it. “ Ye’ve told me over ’n’ over agin’ ’t ye love me, but ye can’t keer fer me or ye wouldn’t give me pain. Love ’s a sweet ’n’ tender thing, Billy. It never harms.”

He laughed hoarsely, scattering the broken grasses over his knees.

“ Ay,” he said, “ I understand that Love ’s a tender thing, a sweet thing, sweeter ’n what life is, but—” here he smiled strangely, “ not ’s sweet s’death. Ye needn’t fear me, Mariar, I wouldn’t harm ye fer the world. Don’t go. I’ve got some news fer ye. I saw Jim Hulse this mornin.’ ”

She did not reply, but settled back on the log from which she had partly risen, and he knew that she was listening.

“ I reckon ye’d like to know how he gits along all by hisself down there.” He gave his head a jerk in the direction of Hulse’s cabin.

Her head drooped till her eyes were hidden.

“Ye’ve been tellin’ ’im,” she whispered.

“They ain’t nothin’ the matter o’ me,” he went on, unheedingly. “See, my hand’s stiddy, ain’t it? It don’t shake, does it? I’m all right. Only my head goes wrong when I try to think o’ some things—not o’ *that*; it’s clear enough when I think o’ *that*! But a while ago when I tried to ’member a piece o’ poetry I learned when I was a boy,—suthin’ ’bout a busy bee ’n’ a openin’ flower,—I couldn’t make head nor tail o’ it. My thoughts git sort o’ twisted ’n’ crooked sometimes; that’s all. It ain’t much. I’m ruther tired.” He drew his knees up to his chin in a grotesque fashion and clasped his arms around them.

“Ye don’t know what a day I’ve had o’ it; ye can’t have no idee. Yes, I saw ’im this mornin’. He was quiet—my God! how white ’n’ still he was with the sun a-shinin’ in his open eyes! I was goin to tetch ’im,—I was goin’ to drag ’im back out o’ the sun, but the blood ran out o’ his heart, ’n’ his eyes flared, ’n’ his teeth threatened, ’n’ I didn’t dare. He’s layin’ up there amongst the lilies now—mebbe the coyotes are at him by this time.”

She had sprung forward and was shaking him by the shoulders as if trying to awaken a man who was talking in his sleep. “Billy—Billy—Billy!” she repeated the word in a hoarse, whispered shriek, but he neither noticed nor looked at her.

“I staid aroun’ there all day tryin’ to keep ’em off. They’re devils, them coyotes—’s bad’s wolves. ’N’ they was a buzzard I had to fight. It tried to tear his eyes. I beat it off with my gun, but it come back time ’n’ ag’in. I’d a shot it, only my gun was empty,—I think the hellish bird knew. I used the charge early in the mornin’, ’n’ I didn’t have no more,—I didn’t think I’d need no more. I wish ’t I could a-got the cussed bird in my

hands. I'd a-wrung its neck slow 'n' stiddy—like that—jes' to hear it scream while its bones cracked. Ye don't know how it looks to see one o' them brutes fightin' to pick out a dead man's eyes! 'N' I couldn't use Jim's gun, nuther. That was empty too. He fired, but he missed me. I reckon he done it o' purpose. But my aim was sure. I aimed at his heart, 's I told 'im to aim at mine. The mark was so plain as he stood there in the sunshine. I could a-hit it a mile away. 'N' we wasn't fur apart. So I fired: 'n' the hills rocked, 'n' I saw 'im heave 'n' fall, 'n' the earth shook. He was so full o' blood fer a thin man, Maria! It ran out over everything, over the grass 'n' the lilies, it filled the river, it splashed the hills, it soaked the sky!" His voice died out in a long exhalation of horror and he covered his face with his hands. Maria had stopped shrieking. She bent over him, yet straining away from him, her hands wrenched apart in her apron, her eyes riveted upon him.

At last he raised his head again and met her eyes.

"It was all for *you*, Maria," he said. "I told 'im' what I'd found out—how ye keered fer 'im'—'n' asked 'im to marry ye 'n' make ye happy. That's what I wanted, was to see ye happy, it didn't matter 'bout me. How could I tell it 'ud turn out so bad? I thought he'd be glad—'s glad 's I'd a-been in his place. But he went into the cabin 'n' shet the door on me. I don't 'member jest his words—'n' I killed 'im. What else could I do? It wa'nt right—I don't pretend to say 't was—it 'ud a-been all right if both o' us was dead. It was all fer you, Mariar; he didn't deserve to live, after that!"

She stood up straight above him now. Looking up at her, he thought her head must touch the stars.

"'N' ye reely done all that?"

He nodded, still fumbling with the grass and twisting it in and out among his fingers.

Her eyes flashed. Anger and scorn took possession of her after the first cold horror was past.

"The man I love is dead," she cried. "But *you* are alive! Ye took good keer o' that! I wonder the words don't blister yer mouth when ye say 'em!"

He looked at her with a slow comprehension of her meaning.

"I didn't do it thinkin' ye'd take up with me, my dear," he said, humbly. "'Fore God, I didn't; I never thought o' that. He agreed to shoot me too; it was a bargain atween us. He said he'd aim fer my heart—'n' he didn't keep his word."

She turned away with a gesture of loathing and he stretched out his hands to her from the ground.

"Don't be too hard on a man," he pleaded. "I know it wa'nt right—I don't ask ye to fergive me. But I don't reckin my head was quite straight—it hain't been, lately. 'N' the river was so loud I couldn't think. I know they ain't no excuse fer me,—I know, I know!" He crawled on his hands and knees after her, trying to clutch her dress as she moved away. Then, rambling vaguely in his speech. "Don't be too hard on a man. The good Lord created us all——"

"'N' how He must a' stared when He created a thing like *you*!" she flashed back in scorn.

With an effort he swallowed something in his throat, and when he spoke again his voice was even and quiet.

"I s'pected this," he said. "Ye're right 'n' just, 's ye allus be. I know I deserved it 'n' I come prepared. We can't even be brother 'an' sister no more, Mariar—that's over, too. I've wronged ye, my dear, wuss 'n' any woman was ever wronged afore. I don't ask ye to fergive me—God Hisself can't fergive sech a deed—so how can you? But I'll do what I can—I'll do what I can. I come prepared fer it. I'm goin' now. Ye'll never

see me ag'in. Hate me as I deserve—hate me allus; it'll be my greatest punishment here 'n' in hell!"

He was gone, and she stood under the cottonwoods alone. The moon shone. The long valley looked like a vitreous sea, burnished by the white light, and the river glided softly past, like a soul that fears.

When Maria reached the cabin after long wandering under the cottonwoods, she found her mother and Maud Eliza listening with big eyes to Ephraim, who was reading a written scrawl by the light of the guttering candle.

"Somebody throwed it into the door!" he cried, excitedly, as soon as Maria entered the room. "I couldn't see who. It must a-been Billy—Billy Bling! Have ye seen 'im to-night, Mariar? I passed 'im a while ago 'n' he looked dredful—like the breakin'-up o' a hard winter. Have ye quar'l'd with 'im? Lord what a blessin'—what a comfort my 'quaintance with that feller's been! why look 'ere—only think! He says in this 'ere paper 't he's goin' to skip the kentry 'n' wants ye 'n' the other feller—that must mean me!—to be happy, so he leaves that new strike o' his—the bigges' gold find o' the age, Mariar!—well, who in the name o' heaven, d'ye think he leaves it to? W'y to *you*, my gal, to *you*! Come 'ere this minnit 'n' embrace yer lovin' father 't 's allus done his part by ye 'n' deserve well o' ye! To Mariar, ole woman, d'ye hear? To Mariar, Maud Elizy, d'ye hear? Think o' that! It's wuth millions, Mariar,—its wuth millions, ole woman!—Maud Elizy, set a bench fer yer sister. 'N' I'll drink champagne when whiskey tastes stale, 'n' learn to play billiards, 'n' ride in the street car, 'n' wear button shoes, 'n'—oh, Lord! mebbe we'll all go to Yurup along o' the rest o' the toney folks down to 'Frisco, 'n' have green peas in February."

"'N' we'll git out o' this 'ere place to wunst," croaked the old woman in raven-like tones, sitting up on the lounge and adjusting her cap, which looked more startled than

ever. “‘N’ we’ll go right down to ‘Frisco ‘n’ buy a house on Nob Hill, ‘n’ I’ll take my sofya along o’ me—mind that, Ephraim!—‘n’ I’ll have cardinal stockin’s ‘n’ individool salt-cellars ‘s a Swipes should, ‘n’ be looked up to as the fat o’ the land. Eh, Mariar?”

But Maria answered nothing. She turned her face away from the light and wept.

THE END.



A detailed line drawing of the Eiffel Tower, showing its intricate lattice structure and the various levels and platforms. The tower is positioned on the left side of the image, with its base extending towards the bottom left corner. A beam of light emanates from the top of the tower, pointing towards the 'GOLD MEDAL' text.


GOLD MEDAL

PARIS

1889

COLGATE'S
PERFUMES
AND
SOAPS.

714

A detailed line drawing of various Parisian buildings, including a large domed structure, a church with a tall spire, and several smaller houses and shops. The buildings are located at the base of the Eiffel Tower, extending from the bottom left towards the bottom right corner of the image.





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